

The Shinzahou Chronicles Vol 3: Byakko No Yokan

VraieEsprit

Fushigi Yuugi

Complete



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The Shinzahou Chronicles Vol 3: Byakko No Yokan

VraieEsprit

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This story was first published on September 21st, 2007, and was last updated on November 6th, 2007.

FicLab ID: _XeYakWr/m4g60cal/10700E581

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Summary

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|------------------|---|
| title | The Shinzahou Chronicles Vol 3: Byakko No Yokan |
| author | VraieEsprit |
| source | https://www.fanfiction.net/s/3795924/ |
| published | September 21st, 2007 |
| updated | November 6th, 2007 |
| words | 146,597 |
| chapters | 21 |
| status | Complete |
| rating | Fiction T |
| tags | Anime/Manga, Complete, Fanfiction, Fantasy/Adventure, Fushigi Yuugi |

Description

Chichiri has sent Hikari and company to Sairou on Taiitsukun's advice, but Kutou are not far away. The sinister prophesy of the Byakko Seishi, Toroki will change Hikari's perception of the ShijinTenchisho forever. The fight for Byakko's Shinzahou heats up as Toroki's fellow seishi Amefuri reveals the true depth of his hatred for the Tiger...can they prevent tragedy in the temple?

Chapter 1

The Shinzahou Chronicles *Introduction and Disclaimer*

*“Umare-ochita dake de wa otoko ni wa narenai — hontou no tsuyosa
wa kitto ai kara hajimaru”*

*(Just being born doesn't make you a man — surely real strength begins
with love)*

Tasuki: Setsunakutemo... Zutto.

Part three! Off to the West now — to Sairou, to claim the
Shinzahou and relic belonging to Byakko.

I've been watching the hit stats and favourite story marks rising,
and I'm really really glad people have come by to read this story arc
of mine. If you like it, hate it or have a comment, please do leave me a
review or send me a PM. I have no proof-reader, so I'm entirely reliant
on reader feedback to tell me what I'm doing right or wrong!

And we're about to hit midpoint in the story arc — this story is
fairly pivotal in many ways.

I really wanted to write something in Sairou, and I made up my
mind a long time before I got to this point that it would be a major
turning point of a trip, with Hikari facing the toughest challenge of
her time in the book world so far. It's time to see how far the brat has
come, I guess... lets just say that this story has some happy moments
and some very not so happy moments... and leave it at that :)

There may be blood. . (Better cover Aoi's eyes, quick, before he
throws up...)

I also wanted to do this because of all of the Shichi Seishi, Byakko's
remain largely a blank slate. Aside from the trio who appear in the
original manga, nothing is really known about the Byakko Shichi
Seishi. So I've taken the liberty of doing some creative thinking, and
this story will introduce one of them — the reincarnated warrior with
the sign of “Toroki”.

A quick caveat regarding Western geography — I've not been able
to find the name of any Sairou towns, so I've made up my own.:) An
additional caveat — all the new character/place names and meanings
in this (and all my Yuugi) stories are based on *Japanese* Kanji

readings, not Traditional Chinese readings, even though this is based in Ancient China. This is for the simple reason that I know absolutely no Chinese whatsoever, and I'm not even going to attempt it. My Japanese is somewhat better, so I'm sticking to that (although there may be the occasional moments of artistic licence. Gomen). Japanese was good enough for Watase Yuu and Nishizaki Megumi. It's good enough for me!

Despite the fact Seiryuu was originally raised in Sairou, not a lot is really known/told about it as a country or its people or anything else aside from the shrine and the little area we see with Tokaki, Subaru and Tatara. It can be assumed that by the time this story takes place, both Tokaki and Subaru have expired from old age. Whether or not they or Tatara have been reborn is uncertain. I wanted to keep Tatara out of it completely because of the way his spirit and Suzuno's travel off into oblivion together in the manga. And Tokaki and Subaru would have the same age constraints as the Suzaku/Seiryuu Seishi, if not worse.

But... Toroki is not the only Byakko Seishi who has a part to play in events — although she is the only one to be introduced in this story. (Yes, I decided she'd be a girl. Why not? Soi was. Subaru was. Inami was. Nuriko wanted to be, and Uruki was whenever he wanted to slaughter people. And heck, Namame was made of stone... I think that it's okay to have Toroki be a girl, right??) As for Toroki's power, that's entirely my own thinking. If anything has been said officially about Toroki or any of the other unmentioned Seishi, I've not been able to find it. (Hence any conflicts — accidental).

Byakko's Shinzahou is, of course, Suzuno's '*te-kagami*', or hand-mirror.

The title of this one is Byakko no Yokan — Byakko's Premonition. If that isn't a clue to Toroki's latent stellar ability, I don't know what is... but it also has a darker meaning... a confirmation, in a sense, of the world Hikari first saw when she entered the Shijin Tenchishou. This story will, maybe, confirm that what Hikari saw was indeed the future of the book world. And that changing fate is more difficult than it might appear.

With all that said, Watase Yuu is the owner of FY and the characters, not me!! Any added characters (ie Hyoushin, Aoiketsu, Shishi, Jin, etc) are of my own creation, except for when they tie in with Watase Yuu's world — they are based on concepts and frameworks entirely unrelated to any other source. (This includes all reference/character biography/fleshing, background and detail given

to the Byakko Seishi “Toroki” and “Amefuri” although the concept of Byakko Seishi belongs to Watase Yuu.)

My interpretation of Toroki and Amefuri are unique to me and are not to be duplicated in any other source without permission. The Meihime tribe, their language and appearance are entirely of my creation also, and ditto goes for them in terms of fan-fiction re-production.

(And the same goes for any other OCs I happen to have thrown into the mix!)

第三卷：白虎の予感

Volume Three: Byakko no Yokan

Prologue

Sairou

Ten Years Earlier

“Onii-chan! Onii-chan! Where are you, Onii-chan!”

The small girl scrambled over the rocky, dusty landscape, tears drying on her face in the hot desert sun as she struggled on with her quest. At only ten years old, it was hard going, as the terrain was rough even for an adult to negotiate, but despite this she soldiered on, her heart focused on only one objective in spite of the burning heat of the day. Her hair had long since lost its ribbons on the sharp, unforgiving branches of the few jagged trees which dared to grow in such barren surroundings, and her thick dark hair flowed loose around her face, tangled and knotted in the sharpness of the warm breeze.

“Onii-chan!” She exclaimed again, the landscape swaying and twisting before her gaze as an image flooded her senses and she cried out, sinking to the ground as she forced the pictures away. “Onii-chan, where are you! Onii-chan! I know you’re here! Onii-chan!”

A sudden breeze at her right hand alerted her to the fact she had company, and she raised her gaze, blinking as she took in his features. His face was smudged and dirty from his trek into the desert, but it was not this nor the worn, or blood-flecked nature of his clothing that troubled her so much as the coldness in his dark eyes.

“Onii-chan.” She whispered, holding out her hand, but he made no attempt to take it, merely staring at her as if he was not entirely sure who she was.

At length, the boy spoke.

“Myoume, what are you doing here?” He asked quietly, and fresh tears glittered on Myoume’s lashes at the strange, strained note in his tones.

“Onii-chan.” She whispered. “I came... I came to... to find you. Because... I was... I was scared.”

“Scared?” This startled the older child, and Myoume was comforted by the faint flicker of anxiety in his expression. “Why? What’s scared you? What’s happened? Has someone blamed you... are you in trouble, because of... of what I did?”

“No.” Myoume shook her head, reaching up to grasp her brother’s dirty hands in her own scraped, dry ones. “No, Onii-chan. But I don’t like it. I don’t like it when you go away! I want you to come home. I want...”

“How can I?” The boy’s eyes closed up again and he turned away, pulling back from her grasp. “I can’t ever go home now, Myoume. You know I can’t. Not after what’s happened. I can never go back.”

“But... but noone... it wasn’t... you can’t...” Myoume shook her head, grabbing the folds of her brother’s ragged shirt as she pulled herself to her feet. “Onii-chan, people won’t blame you. Not when they know... not when they understand...”

“I killed him.” The boy’s voice, strange and hard, cut across her protestations and a chill shot through Myoume’s heart as he fixed her with a flat, emotionless gaze. “And I don’t feel sorry that I did, Myoume. I’m glad I did it. I want to do it again. But killing him all the times in the world won’t take away the truth. How can I go back? Even if you’re right — even if they don’t blame me... what else can I do? I can’t face Mother... not now I know.”

“Mother doesn’t blame you either.” Myoume whispered. “Please, Onii-chan... please, come home! I’m so frightened of what will happen if you don’t!”

“Myoume...” The boy touched his fingers against her face briefly, shaking his head. “You’re different, you know that. We’re not the same... not any more. Not now we both know the truth. That man... what he did... if I go back, I’m going to constantly remind Mother of that fact, aren’t I? I’ve probably done so since I was born, damn his soul to hell. And now I’ve killed him... now I’ve got blood on my hands, too — who would ever want me back, given that? I’ve shown my true colours.”

He glanced down at his hands.

“I used my power to slay him.” He whispered. “Because of that, I was able to kill him. And I felt... when he died... I felt...”

He sighed, eying his sister helplessly.

“It’s over.” He said sadly. “I will go away, somewhere, somehow. I don’t

know where, or what I'll do. Maybe I... maybe I'll die. I don't know. But I won't go home. I can't go home. I'm not the same person any more... I've changed inside. Everything... is different. For Mother's sake — for your sake... I won't ever go home."

"But Onii-chan..."

"Myoume."

"If you... if you go away, you... you won't be my brother any more." Tears flowed anew down Myoume's cheeks as she flung her arms around her brother, burying her head in his shoulder. "I don't want that — I don't want it! But if you go away, you won't be... you won't be Onii-chan any more! And... and I can't bear it... I can't bear it!"

"Why are you crying so hard, you idiot?" The boy disentangled himself from her embrace, holding her at arm's length as he gazed down into the dark seiran eyes that swam with grief. "Stop it... stop it, please. You know I can't go back... Myoume, please. Don't cry like that! You act as if I've done nothing wrong — as if I'm not evil. But I must be — I must be. Otherwise, why didn't I care, when he died? Why did I... why was I glad... when I killed him?"

"Because you were angry, and he made you suffer." Myoume whispered. "But it isn't too late. Onii-chan, if you go away... if you go..."

She swallowed hard, raising her gaze to his once more.

"I've seen it." She whispered. "Onii-chan, if you go now... you and I... we'll never be brother and sister again. And Byakko..."

"Forget Byakko!" Now the boy's tones were harsh, as he pushed her away, shaking his head. "I want nothing to do with Byakko or his stupid rules and regulations! Because of him, my mother was raped! Because of him, she had to give birth to me and raise me even though she suffered so much to do it! Because of Byakko, I'm a killer now. Because of Byakko, you're crying... Myoume... I don't care what Byakko does or doesn't want. I'm not going to be any part of his stupid game! I didn't choose this life — and **I don't care!**"

Myoume reeled back as if stung, shaking her head slowly.

"But... but..." She whispered, swallowing hard. Slowly she glanced down at her right hand, stretching out her fingers until she could see the faint glimmer of white against the tip of the index one.

"But I'm Toroki." She murmured. "And you..."

"I'm not anything of the sort." The boy snapped bitterly. "So you might as well not even say it. I'll never be him, and I'll never play by Byakko's

rules. Never! Not now, and not **ever!**"

Myoume's eyes widened in dismay, and she shook her head.

"Even as you say that, Onii-chan, I can... I can see it." She said softly, gesturing towards her companion's throat, and the boy cursed, clapping his hand over the top of the glittering white character that blazed there.

"I won't ever be Amefuri." He said coldly. "Not ever."

Myoume bit her lip.

"So you want... us to be enemies?" She asked hesitantly. "Onii-chan — is that what you want?"

"Why the hell would it mean that?" Her brother demanded. "I told you — I'll go away. It has nothing to do with you."

"It has everything to do with me." The young girl shook her head. "Onii-chan, I saw it. I saw it! If you go away... if you go... one day, we will be enemies. One day, we... we will fight. And one... one of us... will... will die."

The boy's eyes widened at this, as all colour drained from his features.

"So now you see, you have to come home. You have to be Amefuri." Myoume was begging him now. "Because I can't fight my brother, Onii-chan. **I can't fight my brother!**"

For a moment, her companion was silent. Then, he drew a deep breath of air into his lungs, gritting his teeth as he brought himself under some element of control.

"If you believe I would ever hurt you, Myoume, then I guess you think the same as everyone else. That I'm a monster and that I'm not your brother anyway." He whispered.

"No!" Myoume's expression flooded with horror. "No, that isn't it! It isn't it at all!"

"Well, we all know that Toroki's sight doesn't lie." There was bitterness in the boy's tones, and he turned away from her, taking a few steps towards the arid mountain caves that lay to the west. "But if I don't see you again, little sister, your prophesy can never come true. Can it? I can never hurt someone I never see... can I?"

"Onii-chan..." Myoume sank back to the ground, as once more images flooded her vision. "Onii-chan, please! Onii-chan..."

She buried her head in her hands, fighting against the onslaught of frightening, vivid pictures that suddenly overwhelmed her body. By the time

they were gone, she knew that she was once more alone in the desert wasteland, and her heart ached as she watched the breeze blow clouds of dust and sand across the desolate landscape.

“Onii-chan.” She whispered. “Please... I don’t want to fight you! Onii-chan... please... come home!”

Chapter 2

Chapter One

“You know, for someone who’s about to embark on a big adventure, you look kinda down in the dumps.”

Shishi leapt neatly down from the stone wall that marked the Ri family land, narrowly missing the thriving row of herbal crops as she steadied herself, shooting her companion a playful grin. “What’s on your mind, Hiki? Getting cold feet about our trip to the West before we’ve even left yet?”

“Yes... I suppose so.” Hikari raised her head from where she had been huddled beneath the branches of an old tree, knees clutched to her chest as she had immersed herself deep in thought. “Tomorrow seems so soon, Shishi. And I don’t feel... much stronger. I mean, I’ve done everything Chichiri has told me, and I’ve done my best to focus the magic I have, but it’s still such alien territory to me. I’m worried about going to Sairou... without Tasuki and Chichiri, I don’t feel like it’s very safe.”

“Ah. So today is a wimp Hiki day.” Shishi dropped down beside her, casting her an amused look. “I should’a known. You flip between brave an’ silly so easily, it’s impossible to know which Hikari you’re goin’ to be at any given moment. Stop sweatin’ it, okay? Look forward to it as an adventure. You won’t be on your own, after all. You got Jin an’ me comin’ with you an’, Aniue an’ my parents aside, there ain’t no better on Reikaku-zan when it comes to fightin’ our corner. Besides, you needn’t worry too much about your Shinzahou side. It tends to come out when there’s trouble, right?”

“Right...” Hikari said cautiously.

“So if we meet trouble, you’ll be fine.” Shishi shrugged. “It’s just because now you’re not in danger. That’s all.”

“You’re actually excited about this, aren’t you?” Hikari realised, and Shishi grinned, nodding her head.

“Damn right.” She agreed. “First time I’ve been allowed to go anywhere without Kashira, Okaasan or someone else grown up in tow. Jin’s been off the mountain loads o’ times to collect toll or run errands, an’ noone’s ever let me go with him because of the stupid reason of me bein’ three years younger. But I’m not a kid any more.

An' this is my chance to prove it."

She sighed contentedly, gazing up at the clear blue sky. It was three days since Hikari, along with Tasuki and Chichiri had mounted Taikyoku-zan to seek Taiitsukun's advice and when she had heard the news, Shishi had almost wished she could have hugged the imperial hermit for her advice.

"After all, if that Taiitsukun dame is Emperor of the Heavens, an' is as powerful an' important as Kashira's always sayin', they can't argue with what she said." She concluded now. "Which means, at long last, I'm goin' to get a chance to prove what I can do. If I'm ever goin' to be worthy of Papa's tessens, Hiki, I gotta prove how strong I am sometime."

"Maybe." Hikari sighed, shaking her head. "You know, the truth is, when you say things like that you make me feel like you're older than me. Except you're not. You're younger. Just... you don't seem to get scared of things all that easily, Shishi. In my world, they'd never let a fourteen year old kid go to another country on her own like that."

"Well, I won't be on my own." Shishi shrugged her shoulders. "You an' Jin are comin' too, right?"

"Yes, but..."

"An' Jin's almost eighteen." Shishi interrupted. "So stop frettin' about it. We'll be all right. You know we make a pretty good team, after our trip to the North. An' at least Sairou ain't covered in snow, right? You can't freeze to death so easily in the West, thank God."

"True." Hikari acknowledged. "You ever been to Sairou before?"

Shishi shook her head.

"Before we went to Hokkan, I'd never been out of the south." She admitted. "But I've heard Chichiri an' Kashira both talk about it. That's where Seiryuu no Miko raised the dragon, you know — Sairou. Using the thing we're goin' to find — Byakko no Miko's hand mirror. Chichiri's been all over the four lands in the past an' he's already given Jin a rough sketch map of the passage through the mountains that's easiest goin'. We'll be fine, Hiki. Trust me. You said yourself that we were goin' to go sweet-talk this Toroki person, not fight her, right? An' we're sure as hell not launchin' into battle with any other Byakko Seishi — that'd be damn near suicide. So what's the problem? Cheer up! I thought you were gettin' more used to this world now — don't freak out on me, okay?"

"Okay." Hikari sighed, nodding her head. "I just... I guess I've been

here two weeks now, more or less. And I still don't feel I know very much. Or that I'm much use to you — any of you. You and Jin at least can both fight your corner if need be. I either glow like a radioactive idiot or I'm totally helpless. I don't like either one."

"Radioactive...?" Shishi eyed her curiously. "You say some weird things sometimes, Hiki. Is that another thing from your world?"

Hikari nodded.

"It's too complicated to explain, though." She admitted with a sigh. "And I'm not good enough at physics to even try."

She got to her feet, dusting her skirt down as she did so.

"I guess like it or not, we're going." She reflected ruefully. "And I suppose you have a point — that we're going to talk, not fight. So it will probably be okay. And the sooner we go, the sooner I can go home — right?"

"You're still that desperate to go back to your world?" Shishi looked surprised. "I thought of late you were kinda resigned to bein' here a while — that you'd even come to like it some. Was I wrong?"

"No." Hikari admitted. "I guess I do like it here. In Kounan, at least. In the Eastern Village, anyway. It's peaceful, and the people are nice, and I suppose I feel safe here, like nothing can hurt me. But going into other lands, and without Tasuki or Chichiri — I suppose I'm just chicken. And when I think of those things, that's when I get homesick for my world. There are dangerous things in Tokyo, sure enough. But I... I sort of know how to handle life there better. And my family are there, too — I'm still missing my parents."

"S'pose that makes sense." Shishi acknowledged. "But you don't hate our world now, right? I mean, you don't hate bein' round us?"

"No, not that." Hikari managed a smile at this. "Since you and I buried the hatchet, it's been a lot better. You and Jin are like proper friends to me now, after the things we've been through. It's just nerves, that's all. I guess that once we get going, I'll be fine."

"That's the spirit." Shishi grinned. "Hey... where are you off to now?"

"I promised Meikyo I'd help her and Aidou-san in the outhouse this afternoon, tying the herbs into bundles for market." Hikari replied. "I find it hard to say no when Mei-chan asks me something like that, Shishi — it really is like having a little sister, and I've never had one before. It's sort of nice... and tomorrow we'll be leaving."

“Well, you go play with the herbs if you feel that way.” Shishi laughed, nodding her head. “Mei-chan sure has taken to you, that’s true enough. Especially since you came to her rescue the other day — I guess you’re someone’s hero already.”

“That’s the reason I’m still here, and you know it.” Hikari acknowledged. “To try and save Meikyo and Eiju and Aidou-san — and all the people in this place who’ve never done anything to deserve what I saw when I first came here. I’ll see you later, okay? Duty calls.”

Shishi raised her hand in a gesture of agreement, watching as the dark-haired girl headed back towards the farm building and she grinned, leaning back against the trunk of the tree as she contemplated things.

“I couldn’t have asked for a better excuse to go exploring.” She mused pensively. “Even Okaasan can’t complain when Taiitsukun is the one giving the directions. Things have been a lot more interesting round here since Hikari came, that’s for sure. Thanks to her, I’ve been to the Northern lands and now I’m going to the West... if ever I’m going to prove how strong I can be, now’s the time. Even if Kashira ain’t happy about me goin’ off like this, I think he knows I have to. And Jin will be with us. So it will be fine.”

“You look like someone died an’ left you their fortune.” A voice startled her out of her reverie and she turned, glancing up and grinning as she met the playful gaze of the older bandit.

“Jin!”

“Yep, that’s me.” Jin winked at her, settling himself on the ground opposite. “What are you doing here? Kashira’s been lookin’ all over the mountain for you... you could’a told him you were comin’ to visit your Aunt and Uncle.”

“Actually, I suppose I came to see Hiki.” Shishi looked rueful. “Stupid, ain’t it? A week ago we were ready to kill one another. But the girl’s okay, Jin. I like her a lot now we’ve got past all of that. An’ it’s sort of nice to have a friend my age, if you know what I mean.”

“I’ve been replaced then, have I?” Jin teased, and Shishi punched him lightly on the arm, shaking her head.

“Don’t be an idiot! Besides, you’re older’n me, and you’re a guy. This is different. It ain’t like that.”

“Guess you don’t know any other girls, except Meikyo.” Jin relented, leaning back on his elbows as he contemplated. “An’ she’s a lot younger than you are. There ain’t any other girls on the mountain

— you're the only one, an' you're only there because you're Kashira's cub. I never realised it bothered you, though... you've never been much of a girl yourself."

"I could belt you for that." Shishi warned, but amusement flickered in her bronze eyes. "No. I ain't a girly girl — that's not it. An' I don't think it does bother me, really. Jus' havin' Hiki around is sort of cool — don't you think so? Aside from the fact she knows nothin' about this world an' she says an' does some of the strangest things — what you and she did gettin' Mei-chan back was really cool. An' what she did in Makan, too, standin' up to that weirdass ghost. She ain't quite like a bandit, but she's more fun than I thought she'd be, when I first found her in the valley."

"True enough." Jin nodded. "I won't disagree with you. And I'm glad you've stopped fighting. I like the both of you, and I don't like being stuck in the middle. This trip West would'a been a major headache for me if you were still arguing like you were before."

"Somehow I doubt anyone would've let us go." Shishi said ruefully. "But it'll be okay, now."

She eyed him speculatively.

"You know, you said just then you like the both of us." She reflected. "Right?"

"Right. An' gettin' involved in girl fights is not somethin' a guy who values his life should ever do — Kashira taught me that."

"But you've known me since we were small." Shishi tilted her head on one side, eying him curiously. "You've known Hiki a fortnight... yet you like us both the same?"

"You expect me to answer that? I ain't stupid." Jin snorted. "I've lived round you long enough to know when you're settin' me up for a fall, Shi-chan!"

"No..." Shishi faltered, then she narrowed her eyes, pursing her lips as an idea occurred to her. "It's just... you have only known her two weeks, that's all."

"That doesn't mean I can't be friends with her, does it?" Jin raised an eyebrow. "I ain't taking sides against you, lion cub, so stop looking at me as if I'm your prey! I told you — girl fights are something I keep out of... end of subject."

"Hiki and I have nothing to fight about right now." Shishi shrugged unconcernedly.

“Then shut up an’ change the subject to somethin’ else.”

“Okay.” Shishi nodded, shooting him a thoughtful glance, then spreading her hands. “Are you nervous about this trip? Hiki is — I’m not. But sometimes you think of things that I don’t — an’ effectively, you’ll be in charge. Can you handle it, Jin-kun? It’s a lotta responsibility.”

“I know.” Jin admitted. “But I think it will be all right. Hikari did say that we were going to negotiate, after all. And I’ve given Kashira my word to make sure nothing happens to either one of you. I wouldn’t want to face him if I let him down, to be honest — so I suppose I’m a little worried about it. But then again, sometimes you gotta do this stuff, right? A bandit has to do what he has to do... Kashira’s orders. An’ this is bigger than jus’ Reikaku-zan — feels like it’s Suzaku himself givin’ this order.”

“I know what you mean.” Shishi pursed her lips. “I ain’t seen Papa... Kashira like this before. Like one of Suzaku’s people, instead of Genrou of Reikaku-zan. I always knew he was a pretty kickass King o’ the mountain, but when the trouble happened before, he went away from Okaasan and me an’ I never got to see him as Tasuki. When he fights to defend the mountain, he never seems to hold back. But when we were in the North — I never saw him flame his tessens the way he did at that Miramu creep. It’s a pity he wasn’t chargrilled — with Kashira makin’ such an effort an’ all.”

“It would have been deserved.” Jin murmured, and Shishi stared at him.

“That’s more like somethin’ *I’d* say!” She exclaimed. “I ain’t heard *you* speak like that before!”

“I know.” Jin admitted. “But I didn’t like how he shot that arrow at Hikari without even knowing who she was. That’s why I went with her, when she insisted on charging in there to save Meikyo. I still don’t know if she did the right thing or not, giving him that thing. But I damn well wasn’t going to let him hurt her if I could help it. If he’d have tried, I’d have gone for him — he made me angry.”

Shishi’s eyes became big, and Jin laughed, self-consciously running his fingers through his long hair.

“I guess Suzaku’s got to me.” He added. “She seemed so strong and decisive when she made up her mind to go find them. I suppose it took me along for the ride. Besides, if anything happens to Hikari, we’re screwed, right? We need her if this world is goin’ to survive... isn’t that how it goes?”

Shishi eyed him in silence for a moment, then she smiled.

"I thought so, you know." She reflected, and Jin sent her a confused look.

"Huh?"

"I did wonder, but now I really am sure."

"What are you talking about, Shishi?" Jin frowned. "What are you sure about... want to clue me in?"

"Sure." Shishi settled herself more comfortably against the tree trunk, meeting his gaze with a searching, knowing one of her own.

"You *like* Hiki, don't you?" She murmured, and Jin started, stricken. Shishi nodded.

"I thought so." She repeated. "You do. You lamebrain — you've gone an' fallen in *love* with her, haven't you?"

"Shut the hell up, will you?"

Dismay flared in Jin's eyes and he held up his hands, gazing around him anxiously as he gauged whether or not anyone else had heard Shishi's carrying tones. At his reaction, Shishi laughed, swiping his hands down as she shook her head.

"Relax, you moron. There's only you and I here." She said airily. "Hiki's gone to dry herbs with Meikyo — or tie them — or something, I forget what. But Aidou-obasama won't let either of them bother about what's going on out here so long as there's work to be done. An' Chichiri an' Eiju went to the mountain to see Kashira about Eiju gettin' sword trainin' or something. So we're all alone. You can relax. An' tell me all about it."

Jin sighed, rubbing his temples.

"If it's that obvious that *you've* noticed it, I'm screwed." He muttered, and Shishi glared at him indignantly.

"What the hell does *that* mean?"

"Nothing." Jin frowned. "I just... it isn't on purpose. Actually, Kashira told me to knock it on the head an' I'm tryin' — I'm not thinkin' about things from that angle. I don't even really understand it myself. Maybe it's like I said — Suzaku's spell. I don't know. But she'll go back to her world when all this is done, an' besides, she's the Shinzahou. She's important to the whole of Kounan — she's even on first name terms with the Emperor. An' I'm the son of a whore who drank too much an' then went an' died for it, leavin' me scrabblin' for

crumbs an' coins where I could snatch them. The gulf could not be wider."

"Well, I won't pretend I ain't glad that you're not pursuin' it." Shishi said with a sigh. "Because I don't want to be playin' the gooseberry on our little tour. But Hiki ain't stuck up or nothin', you know. I don't think she cares who your Ma was, or that you don't know who your Pa was."

She grinned.

"For all you know, he could'a been anyone." She added. "A government official, a judge, someone real important. An' besides..."

"Before you get into your stride, lets not talk about this any more." Jin shook his head. "I really don't want to, Shishi. I like Hikari. Maybe it's more than I should... but I'll get over it. I belong on the mountain, anyway, an' I can't go followin' stupid ideas when there's no way in hell anythin' could ever come of it. Hell, she doesn't know — an' I don't want her to know — that I'm feelin' like this. Doubtless she hasn't even thought twice about me or anyone in this world. She's desperate to go home — anyone can see that. So forget about it — all right? It has no future, an' there's no point. I ain't a fool... jus' shut up about it an' let me deal with it myself. Okay?"

"Okay." Shishi eyed him in surprise. "If that's how you feel. I've no real desire to have a drawn out chat about romance with you, anyway."

She pulled a graphic face.

"You might think that there's a point to all that shit, but if you ask me, it gets in the way." She added.

"One day, Shishi, someone is gonna want to come an' tame the wild lion." Jin eyed her speculatively. "You ain't an ugly kid, an' you've fire an' spirit about you that's gonna get someone's attention. What'll you do when he comes along, huh? Claw his eyes out an' spit at him?"

"If he tries to feel me up, it won't be his eyes that he'll be losing." Shishi said sharply, touching the hilt of her sword as if to emphasise her point. "I'm not interested in any of that stuff, now or ever, Jin. I'm goin' to be Kashira of Reikaku-zan one day, an' I'll wield the tessen. Nothin' else matters."

"If you ask me, it'll be a bloody long time before Kashira snuffs it." Jin said reflectively. "You've got a lot of time to fill in the meantime. An' having Anzu-sama around hasn't weakened *him* any."

Shishi sighed, running her fingers through her thick red hair. At length she shook her head.

“Kashira’s a guy.” She said finally, frustration clear in her tones. “An’ much as I hate it, I know that makes it different. If a guy takes a wife, he protects that wife. Well, I’d *be* the wife, an’ some jerk of a guy would think he needed to protect me. An’ I can’t be Kashira an’ have some oaf thinkin’ he needs to stick his neck out every time someone challenges my blade. I ain’t designed to be ‘looked after’, is all.”

“Guess not.” Jin laughed. “Maybe it would’ve been better, then, if you’d been born a boy.”

“Sometimes I wonder that.” Shishi admitted. “Although I don’t know.”

She pulled her sword from its sheath, eying the blade pensively.

“I don’t know as I’d like scrapin’ somethin’ this sharp across my skin every mornin’, just to look like a human an’ not a mountain monkey.” She added. “No, it ain’t me that needs changin’, Jin. I’m a girl an’ that’s okay. I just wish the rest o’ the world would get over it. Girls can be tough too — we can fight, and lead, and do brave things. We’re not all helpless. Look at Okaasama — she can fight her corner good as any man. An’ I’m goin’ to be that kind of woman, too.”

She set her weapon down, resting her chin in her hands.

“Hiki says that in her world, women have jobs.” She murmured. “They go to school with boys and learn the same stuff as they do — like readin’ and writin’ but other stuff, too.”

She grimaced.

“I can read an’ all because Okaasan an’ Papa made sure I did, an’ Chichiri’s taught me bits an’ pieces too. He teaches Mei-chan as well, but he’s unusual in carin’ so much about it.” She added. “Aidou-obasama reads but only basic letters an’ her handwritin’ is real hard to read — she doesn’t see the point in it, an’ it bugs me that she doesn’t. It ain’t like I want to be some great literary genius, but dammit, girls should do what boys can do if they want to. An’ in Hiki’s world, it really sounds like they can. Over there, some women live on their own and just work for their own living. They don’t have to marry or worry about some guy with a protection complex. She said that Yui-sama — Seiryuu No Miko — *she* went back to that world and she studied and became a doctor. I wish it was like that here. That women weren’t always someone’s property or whatever... that noone will take me seriously because I’m just a girl. I’m not just a thing to be married off,

raped or tied to the house, dammit... that's not what I want at all. So I won't get married. Not ever. Because I'm not going to be that kind of woman."

"Strong words." Jin remarked, and Shishi nodded.

"I'm serious though." She concluded. "Hiki aside, Jin, if you met a girl, Kashira wouldn't mind if you brought her to the mountain or whatever. But you know it's different for me. Whatever I do — it's always goin' to be that way."

"I suppose so." Jin acknowledged. "I hadn't thought it out in those terms before. See, Shishi, I've always looked out for you — you know that. Like you're my kid sister, or something — it's just normal. But I've never really thought about the fact you were a girl. I've treated you the same as I'd have treated a kid brother — and dammit, one day, you're gonna knock my sword outta my hand when we practice, because you're damn near as good as I am now. I guess within the mountain, noone thinks of you as needin' that kind of attention. But outside of it..."

"The idiots at Kaou-zan have been tryin' to take me prisoner for years because they think I'm a weak target." Shishi frowned. "Before that, they used to try an' take Okaasan, too — back before I was born, when she was first livin' on the mountain. They always go for the woman, an' you know the kind of things those dirty, perverted bastards would do if they thought they had a girl in their power. It's sick an' twisted and I swear, any guy who tried it with me would lose somethin' very precious to my blade before the encounter was over. No matter what he did to me — I swear, he'd regret even lookin' at me, by the time I was done."

Jin eyed her ruefully.

"You're sort of scary, when you talk like that." He admitted, and Shishi laughed, patting her blade companionably.

"Don't worry about it." She assured him. "My sword likes you. Besides, you ain't the kind of slimy jerk who'd do that kind of thing. So you're safe. I promise."

"Glad to hear it!" Jin grinned, reaching over to ruffle her thick wavy hair playfully. "Ah, it'd be a strange day indeed that you brought a man back to Reikaku-zan as anything other than tribute, anyway. As you said, you ain't on that wavelength. And I wouldn't change you, kid. I like you this way."

"One day I'll be Kashira an' you'll be like Anieue." Shishi agreed.

“Between us, we’ll take care o’ the mountain. But like you said, Kashira’ll be around a long time yet. I heard some of the Byakko people lived to a hundred, so unless he loses some battle — an’ like that’s ever gonna happen, when he’s got the tessens! — we’ll have him a long time yet.”

“I wonder what this Byakko girl we’re going to see is like.” Jin looked pensive. “Hikari seemed a bit confused on the subject when she explained it — has she said any more to you about what Taiitsukun told them?”

“Not really.” Shishi acknowledged. “Only that she was a peaceful person and someone we should try to befriend, if we can. But first we have to find her.”

“But Hikari found the last Shinzahou. She was drawn to it.” Jin pointed out. “I don’t think we’ll have a problem with that part of things.”

“Well, I can’t wait to leave.” Shishi’s eyes glittered with anticipation. “Another adventure in Suzaku’s name... I can’t wait!”

“I believe that’s everything.”

Hyoushin stood at the railing of the ship, casting his impassive, even gaze across the deck as he observed the crew loading the last of the supplies for their journey to Sairou. It was at least a week’s travel, possibly more, he mused, to be trapped aboard a floating target and as a rule he disdained sea travel in favour of land transport, since defence was always easier when you could find a place to hide. And yet, he acknowledged, the men who had rigged the craft had done a good job. Trading sails flew from the uppermost masts, with the flags of merchant guilds fluttering above them, and Hyoushin knew that at a glance no passing vessel would guess that this ship carried the representatives of the beleaguered Emperor of Kutou as they sailed to track down Sairou’s holy treasure.

“And steal it.” He reflected absently. “Seiryuu’s was Kutou’s by right, but this will be a little different. I only hope that we’re not going to get caught up in difficult politics over it.”

“Talking to yourself is a sign of insanity, so they say, Hyoushin.” Miramu’s distinctive Western accent pierced his thoughts at that moment and he turned, eying the assassin with a faint measure of dislike in his level amethyst gaze. “Or is that just a safety scheme, to make sure someone doesn’t think you’re someone’s fine stone statue that’s been stolen from the palace conclave?”

“Your humour will be the death of you one of these days, I imagine.” Hyoushin said evenly, leaning back against the rail as he did so. “And as for insanity, I presume you to be an expert, considering your reputation. I therefore bow to your opinion in this matter, since you clearly know much more of such things than me.”

“Some might consider that a challenge, you know.” Miramu reflected, and Hyoushin offered a faint smile.

“But we are travel companions bent on the same errand, albeit for different reasons.” He said lightly. “Quarrelling amongst ourselves is a bad example to the men we take with us — and not appropriate behaviour on board a ship chartered by Kutou’s Emperor. So I suppose it will have to wait for another, more suitable occasion.”

Miramu laughed.

“I always did like the way you covered cowardice with fancy words.” He mused absently. “We both know I’d kill you in a heartbeat, because you believe in honour and I think it’s a waste of time.”

“Perhaps.” Hyoushin acknowledged. “Although you mistake cowardice for forbearance, my friend. You are young yet, however. I imagine you’ll have time to learn the difference.”

Miramu eyed him for a moment, then he let out an amused chuckle.

“Of all of Kutou’s court, you may be the only person who I actually find entertaining company.” He reflected. “Your fine Emperor aside, and my interest in him and his cause is purely fiscal, as I’m sure you know. You are a fascinating man, Hyoushin. A cold-souled Northerner who fights for the East yet doesn’t believe in Beast Gods or the divine power they bestow. You are quite an enigma — and I don’t think I have yet fully figured you out.”

“I think that’s possibly a good thing, for both our sakes.” Hyoushin said evenly, turning his gaze back to the ship. “I am not interested in figuring *you* out, however. You are a mean-spirited assassin who puts financial gain above the lives of even the people around him. There is no point wasting time on analysing such a character. I’ve spent enough time in my life with such narrow, greed-driven individuals. If you seek to provoke me into some kind of detailed conversation, you will be disappointed. I have no weakness for you to exploit — and you will have to remain ignorant.”

“Fine, if that’s how you feel.” Miramu shrugged, folding his arms across his chest. “But we are travel companions, are we not? In close confinement for such a period of time — who knows what might be

discovered?”

“You know that the Emperor will not pay you if you are responsible for the deaths of any of his men.” Hyoushin was unmoved. “And if you threaten any of them, Shinzahou or not, I will have you thrown overboard. After all, you are a man of the desert. I’d like to discover whether or not men of the West can swim.”

Miramu sent his companion an amused glance.

“You truly are as cold as you seem, aren’t you?” He reflected. “I rather like that about you. Don’t worry. I have no intention of killing any of the Emperor’s men.”

“Then we shall do just fine, I’m sure.” Hyoushin observed. “So long as you have not lied... and you do really know where the Shinzahou is. You’ve not been any more forthcoming on its location since you offered to lead us to it — you must forgive my scepticism.”

“I suppose I must, seeing as it’s from you.” Miramu spread his hands. “I will divulge all that you need to know, don’t worry. For my own reasons as much as your own.”

“Yes...” Hyoushin’s eyes narrowed as a flicker of memory danced into his thoughts. “Kintsusei-sama told me that you wanted to see the Shinzahou removed from Sairou. Why is that, exactly?”

“Because it’s the will of the man paying my tab, I imagine.”

“No... I don’t think so.” Hyoushin shook his head. “There’s another reason. One which fits your agenda, Miramu.”

“Perhaps.” Miramu shrugged. “But it’s not your business, if it is.”

“I suppose I don’t care what it is, so long as whatever it is doesn’t interfere with our errand or my King’s orders.” Hyoushin said levelly. Miramu shook his head.

“On the contrary. Taking the Shinzahou from Toroki will be to your benefit.” He responded. “It’s a cursed artefact, I told you — but it’s only cursed in Sairou’s hands. That’s all you need to know. So long as you have it — isn’t that good enough?”

“More curses.” Hyoushin looked thoughtful. “Very well, I’ll play your game for now. We will go, retrieve it and we will spare the life of the one you call ‘Toroki’. So long as Lord Kintsusei has what he wants, nothing else concerns me.”

There was silence for a moment, as the two men both stood side by side, contemplating. Then,

“The Emperor is your weakness, Hyoushin.” Miramu said softly. Hyoushin started, eying him in surprise. Miramu nodded.

“You are cold. Ice to the core, with some of your looks and words.” He added. “But not where the Emperor is concerned. He is your weakness... the one thing you are tied to. Did he free you from slavery, my friend? I imagine he must have done something pretty big to thaw through your frozen soul and obtain your unquestioning loyalty.”

“My past is none of your business.” Hyoushin said flatly. “The Emperor is the Emperor. There need be no other reason for a man to serve him than that.”

“All right. Have it your way.” Miramu grinned. “But I’m sure that I’m right. For a moment your expression flickered — I almost thought I saw humanity in your gaze. You better be careful you don’t let that loose, Hyoushin. You might scare people, if they think you actually have feelings beneath that cool demeanour.”

“You talk nonsense.” Hyoushin said simply. “And I have other things to do than listen to it. Go amuse yourself with something else, Miramu. I’m bored of your company, and I will have enough of it once we leave dock.”

With that he turned away from his Western companion, crossing the wooden deck towards the steps that led down into the accomodation quarters. However, as he did so, Miramu’s words rang in his ears and he frowned, a flicker of icy anger flaring in the depths of his amethyst eyes.

“Cocky, arrogant fool.” He murmured. “I wish there was justification to throw him from the boat right now. I do not trust him and I wonder at Kikei’s boldness in recommending him to Kintsusei-sama. It seems reckless... can we really trust a Western rogue such as that to lead us to the Sairou Shinzahou?”

So, they were coming.

Toroki’s eyes snapped open, sweat beading her brow as she gazed around her at her surroundings. As the images continued to swirl and dance in her head, it took a moment for her to get her bearings and for a moment she just lay back against her blankets, staring up at the uneven cave ceiling that arched over her head. In the dust, image after image had been scribed, as she had struggled to make sense of her visions, but as ever the intensity of the pictures made it hard to see them clearly.

She sighed, pulling herself into a sitting position as she contemplated this latest image. Closing her eyes, she fought to order her thoughts, forcing herself to relive the vision step by step. The arching blue dragon, the ghost with his impassive, piercing eyes. The figure in the shadows — the one whose silhouette made her heart burn with a searing, regretful pain. And then, as she focused harder, she saw the flare of crimson light pooling across the scene, as a beast clawed and leapt from ledge to ledge, baring its teeth as it let out a mighty roar.

But it was not the tiger Byakko that pierced her vision this time. Instead of the familiar, fearsome snowy coat of her master, glittering in iridescent white light, this creature was composed almost of flame, its mane of bright hair thick and vibrant as it spread out in an arc around its head. Emblazoned on the beast's paw was the character for 'phoenix', and the girl shivered, understanding at long last what it meant.

"The dragon of the East." She whispered. "Versus the phoenix of the South. Both are coming... and yet... why does Suzaku hide himself in the form of a lion? What message does this bring me... what does it mean, to see him emulating Byakko's divine form?"

She turned, glancing at the glittering hand-mirror that lay protected and shielded by the shrine at the furthest point of her hermit's cave, and she bit her lip.

"They are coming for that." She murmured. "To take the power of Byakko — is that why Suzaku takes the form he does? Is it... a challenge? Yet I fear something much worse than the ambitions of Sairou's neighbours. It's coming. Just as I've always known... it's coming. The final confrontation..."

She got slowly to her feet, moving towards the mirror as she brushed her right index finger across its glittering, glassy surface. As she did so, a shudder of something intense ran through her body, creating waves of panic and fear through every nerve ending as it overwhelmed her. Being so close to the power of the Shinzahou had made her visions far more powerful and potent, but at a price, and she found herself afraid as she contemplated human company for the first time in four years.

"People whose futures I will see and whose minds I will lay bare before me." She reflected, rubbing her temples. "But they must come. I mustn't be afraid. They must... I must see things more clearly. I must... understand. Beyond the madness — I must see it clearly. The ones that come..."

She closed her eyes a second time, her touch not leaving the mirror's smooth surface as she focused once more on the image of the wild beast branded with the symbol of the phoenix. This time, a certain clarity rushed through her and she clenched her fists, suddenly understanding.

"The dragon fights. The phoenix brings new life." She murmured. "The lion and the light. The one who might yet save our world is tied between these two feuding beasts — the lion is an emissary of Suzaku, but not Suzaku. Suzaku is only the light... there is no bird, only the light."

She swallowed hard, trying to put the pictures back into a sense of logical order.

"They both seek the power of Byakko to solve their problems — but a terrible thing will come to pass, if she is not..."

She wetted her lips, drawing her hand away from the treasure as she felt the rushing, surging sensations begin to fade, and relief set into her tired, strained body.

"Sukunami Hikari." She whispered. "The only one... but... is there enough time? Can she truly be the one... to save this world from its own destruction?"

Chapter 3

Chapter Two

“I can’t believe we’re really at the Palace.”

Jin gazed around him with a flicker of awe in his dark eyes, and, at his sudden faltering, Shishi jabbed him hard in the ribs, shooting him a glare. As she watched her companions, Hikari laughed, amusement in her eyes despite her own apprehension at the task ahead.

“You two are like kids.” She reflected. “Reizeitei-sama’s a nice guy, both of you... just don’t freak him out by cursing in front of him or something, okay?”

“I won’t. I’m just amazed we’re here.” Jin turned to meet her gaze ruefully. “That he wanted to see... us. Before we went. You, I could understand that — you’re Suzaku’s. But Shishi an’ me...”

“You’re Suzaku’s too now, you know.” Chichiri’s voice interrupted him at that moment, as he entered the chamber. “You’re Hikari’s guardians and guides. You’ve been given that responsibility — you’re tied up in this as much as Tasuki and I now, Jin — don’t forget that, all right?”

Jin opened his mouth to respond, but as he caught sight of the elegant young man behind Suzaku’s sorcerer his jaw dropped, rendering him speechless as he sank to the ground, bowing before Kounan’s young and handsome King. Shishi hurriedly followed suit, and Hikari bowed her head in Reizeitei’s direction, finding that this time she was a lot less awed than she had been the first time she had visited Kounan’s royal palace.

Reizeitei smiled, amusement flickering in his beautiful golden eyes as he surveyed them both.

“Well.” He murmured, in his gentle, low tones. “More bandits kneel before me. My father certainly knew how to maximise his resources... Tasuki is not with you, Chichiri? Not on this trip?”

“No. Not this time.” Chichiri shook his head. “You know how he feels about coming too often into this kind of company. Besides, it was Hikari and her travel companions you most wanted to see, Boushinkun. Not tired old Suzaku warriors who seem to have been forcibly retired... for the time being.”

Reizeitei chuckled at this, a musical peal of laughter as he shook his head.

“Not at all.” He said firmly. “As I understand it, you and Tasuki are remaining here in Kounan in case of further attack. As Suzaku’s warriors, it is your divine duty to do so — although in the circumstances I can see it must be trying for all concerned. Particularly for Tasuki — you can tell him that Kounan are honoured that he’s given two of his own as representatives in this mission. I know how important his bandits are to him. And...”

He paused in front of Shishi, reaching out to rest a hand on her shoulder and she glanced up at him, uncertainty in her bronze eyes as for once the mouthy young lion cub was completely lost for words.

“You are as Hikari and I are.” He murmured. “The blood of a Seishi. It must be hardest of all for Tasuki to part with you to Suzaku’s bidding, my friend — but I am not surprised you have inherited the courage to accept his call.”

Shishi just continued to stare at him, and Chichiri laughed.

“Something not often seen... Shishi lost for words.” He remarked lightly. “Bou... Reizeitei-sama, why did you send for them so urgently anyway? They’ll be leaving in less than an hour — but they’ll go through the mountain pass, and not from Eiyuu. I don’t understand why you wanted to see them?”

Reizeitei was silent for a moment, and Hikari caught sight of a flicker of sadness in the young man’s gaze.

“At this age, my father fought and died for Kounan’s sake.” He murmured. “I do not wish to do the same — I do not wish to have to fight. But I also feel... that somehow, there is something that I should do. That I must do... to help. And so... I have thought long and hard about this, and about what my Father would wish me to do. And I have come to a decision.”

“A decision, your Highness?” Hikari looked startled. “What kind of a decision?”

“Will you all follow me to the Shrine of Suzaku?” Reizeitei met Hikari’s gaze with a slight smile. “I always feel that there’s nowhere I can go that is closer to either Suzaku or the man who sacrificed his life for my sake and the sake of all of Kounan’s people. I would be glad to have you accompany me — all of you — to say a quick prayer for my Father’s soul.”

“Of course.” Chichiri looked startled. ‘If that’s what you want.

Shishi, Jin, you too.’ As the bandits hesitated. “You’re a part of this too now, like I said.”

Jin got to his feet, casting Shishi a vaguely confused look, and Shishi shrugged her shoulders, sending him a look which clearly meant, “He’s the Emperor. Don’t argue.” At their expressions, Hikari grinned, coming between them and linking one arm in each of theirs.

“The shrine is pretty.” She told them, as they followed the graceful figure of Kounan’s young leader across the grounds to the sacred place itself. “You two are acting like idiots. I told you already — Reizeitei-sama is nice. He’s not all stuffy and weird like Emperors are in books.”

“This must be the first time since you came into this world that you know more than we do.” Jin said ruefully. “In a million years I never thought I’d meet the Emperor. Or go to the palace shrine where Lord Saihitei was buried.”

“But Saihitei-sama was also Hotohori of the Suzaku Shichi Seishi.” Shishi pointed out. “He and Kashira and Chichiri were buddies. So I guess that makes it... sort of different.”

“Maybe to you.” Jin said frankly. “To me he’s still an Emperor, and I’m still a bandit.”

“Here.”

As they reached the shrine, the Emperor stood back to usher his young companions inside, his eyes bright with life and energy as he watched them. “Truly, I almost do wish I was coming with you. To think that Tasuki’s and Tamahome’s children are embarking on a quest for Kounan and I am unable to be involved... such is the curse of being King.”

He sighed, shaking his head, and for an instant he seemed just like any other eighteen year old youth.

“It’s really very boring.” He admitted. “But at least, if I can send you on your way with Suzaku’s blessing and a little of my father’s good spirit — well, it’s something I can do. Seeing as you act for Kounan, Hikari, and your friends alongside you.”

“We’ll say a prayer for Hotohori-sama.” Chichiri agreed, nudging Shishi gently with his elbow as he did so, for the young bandit had gaped openly at the Emperor when he had expressed his wish to accompany them. “Shishi, that means kneeling down before the statue... not standing there staring into space.”

“Oh. Right.” Shishi flushed red, hurriedly dropping to her knees,

and Hikari smothered a smile, following suit as she remembered her own discomfited first meeting with the Emperor of Kounan.

“But he really meant it, that he wanted to come too.” She reasoned to herself, even as she pushed her hands together in a semblance of prayer. “And I think, if he wasn’t Emperor, he would come. He seems to really want to be like his Father, in some ways... I guess that’s logical, though. Everything everyone says about Hotohori-sama is good. When I do get home, I need to ask Mum and Dad a lot of things about him. It’s funny to pray at the grave of someone you don’t really know, especially if they really did die to try and protect you and your world from harm.”

“There is another reason I’ve brought you to the shrine.”

As they finished their prayers, getting slowly to their feet, Reizeitei shot them a smile, faint flickers of mischief stirring in the depths of his gaze as he surveyed each of the young travellers-to-be in turn. “Chichiri and Tasuki cannot travel with you, and nor can I. But some part of my father can. And I would be honoured if you would accept his protection, on this journey of yours West.”

“Of your... father?” Jin murmured, confusion in his gaze. “Reizeitei-sama... I... don’t understand what you mean.”

“How can Lord Hotohori come with us?” Even Hikari was thrown by this. “He’s dead... and reincarnated. Isn’t he?”

“Oh, I see.” Chichiri’s ruby eye lit up with comprehension and he smiled, nodding his head. “It is a good thought, Bo... Reizeitei-sama. And one I should have thought of earlier. You are right, of course... but then I suppose that’s why you’re Emperor and I’m growing herbs in a mountain village.”

There was humour in his tone and Reizeitei laughed, nodding his head.

“You see where I am heading, then.” He responded. “But your companions do not. So let me clarify what I mean so everyone understands.”

He turned towards the shrine, pausing before it as he removed something from its position beneath the claw of the Phoenix. For a moment he hesitated, as if holding some inner battle with himself. Then he turned, a sober expression on his face as he stepped forward, holding the article out to Hikari.

At the sight of it she gasped, staring at him in disbelief.

“A sword?” She murmured. “You want *me* to have... a sword?”

“Not just any sword.” Chichiri said softly. “Hikari, that blade was given to Lord Hotohori by Taiitsukun. It is a divine blade, and it is charged with Hotohori-sama’s energy and chi. When we left Kounan on our quest for the Shinzahou, many years ago, he made it so, and gave it to your mother to use as self-protection. In the end, she managed to use it to defend not only herself but all of us against the arts of the warrior known as Soi. And since then, it has remained a blessed sword — a *‘shinken’* — a protector of Suzaku’s people just as Hotohori-sama was in life.”

He eyed the weapon for a moment, and Hikari saw the nostalgia in his gaze.

“It’s like a small piece of Hotohori-sama still exists within that blade.” He murmured. “And Reizeitei-sama is right. Even if you haven’t the skill to wield it as a proper sword, Hikari, you should do as the Emperor suggests and take it with you. At the very least, it might prove useful. And even if you aren’t sure how to use it, I imagine with her Suzaku ancestry, Shishi might.”

“I... all right.” Hikari looked surprised, but she nodded, taking the blade as if it were made of delicate glass. “If you think it’s a good idea, then I will.”

She glanced up at Reizeitei, reading the expression on his face, and she smiled at him.

“I’ll bring it back safely.” She promised. “I guess it must mean a lot to you, belonging to your Dad and all, your Highness. But I won’t let it get broken or stolen or anything, I swear. I’ll bring it back. And... and thank you. For trusting me to have it. I... I won’t let you down.”

“I have faith in you, Hikari.” Reizeitei told her gently. “And I’m sure Father would want me to trust Lady Miaka’s daughter with his blessed weapon. He would have faith in you too, if he were here. So I know it is the right thing... for Suzaku’s sword to be in Suzaku’s hands once again.”

“It’s beautiful.” Shishi breathed, gazing at the weapon with any amount of awe. “Seriously, Hiki — I’m going to have to teach you something about swords before we get to Sairou, because a blade like that’ll be wasted on you otherwise.”

Chichiri chuckled.

“As I said, Shishi, you might be strong enough to wield it yourself, on account of your Suzaku blood.” He said lightly, and Shishi’s eyes lit

up with hope.

“Would that be... all right?” She wondered, eying the Emperor for a moment, and Reizeitei nodded his head.

“As I said before, you are like Hikari and I in that respect.” He agreed. “You have your father’s spirit, Shishi — I’m glad I’ve finally had the chance to meet you face to face.”

“You are?” Shishi looked confused, and Reizeitei laughed, nodding again.

“Suzaku’s legend is very dear to my heart.” He murmured. “As are its survivors and their kin. Maybe it’s a kind of obsession — I don’t know. Rich and powerful men are often kept sane only by their obsessions, so I’ve heard.”

The mischievous flicker returned to his gaze at that moment, and he turned to face Jin, offering him a warm smile.

“Your name is Jintsui, isn’t it?” He asked quietly, and Jin nodded, struggling to gather his composure as the Emperor’s smile widened.

“Then I trust Suzaku’s Shinzahou to you and Shishi, Jintsui.” He said amiably. “From all I’ve heard, you’re a fine fighter and almost as good with a sword as your Kashira. Yet I’m sure this journey will be a dangerous and tricky one at times. Thank you for finding the courage within you to undertake it.”

Jin stared for a moment, then returned the smile with a sheepish one of his own.

“Well, lookin’ out for Shishi’s sort of habit for me.” He admitted. “An’ Hikari too, now. We’re a team, your Highness. An’ we’ll do our best. We’ll go West an’ we’ll find Toroki an’ sweet talk her into lettin’ Kounan borrow Sairou’s Shinzahou. You have my word, Reizeitei-sama — I’ll see them both safe an’ that’s a promise.”

“Knowing your leader as I do, I believe a Reikaku-zan bandit’s word is his bond.” Reizeitei said sincerely. “Take care, all of you, and come back safely. Until you do, all of Kounan will be waiting for you.”

So, they were afloat.

Aoiketsu rested his hands against the wood of the boat, peering out of the small porthole of the tiny, cramped cabin with a mixture of anticipation and interest as he watched the waves gently rippling alongside their vessel. Above him, he knew, the mage Suiko was

controlling the flow of the water to ward against storms and uneven tides, and a flicker of excitement washed through him as he contemplated their journey. Travelling by sea was something of a novelty for most of Hyoushin's selected men, and Aoiketsu was already relishing the opportunity.

"I swear, I'm going to die."

A voice from behind him made him swing around, catching sight of his room-mate in the doorway, his face pale and distinctly greenish and despite himself, Aoiketsu hid a smile.

"Maichu, what are you talking about?" He asked playfully. "You can't be scared of little boat trip, surely?"

"I'm not scared." Maichu retorted, dropping down onto his bunk with a groan and flopping back against the pillows. "I'm seasick. It's a different thing. I'm a human being — I belong on land, not on water."

"But surely a soldier of your calibre can manage a few dipping waves?" Aoiketsu teased, humour flickering in his eyes, and Maichu glared at him.

"You shut up." He instructed. "And stop grinning like an idiot, too. You're abnormal, you know that? Standing there like it has no effect on you, when you've never travelled on a ship like this before, either."

"I think it's exciting. And I feel fine." Aoiketsu shrugged. "I'm not a wimp like some people are."

"I already told you, that has nothing to do with it!" Maichu exclaimed, and Aoiketsu laughed.

"Well, nor does the fact I don't like blood make *me* a wimp or a coward either." He said pointedly. "We all have our weaknesses, Maichu. Pull yourself together, huh? No doubt we'll be eating soon and besides, we're going to need our strength for the quest ahead."

At the mention of food, Maichu groaned again, closing his eyes.

"You're a cruel bastard." He muttered. "Go away, will you? Let me die in peace. The last thing I need is your chattering in my ears."

"Fine. Suit yourself." Aoiketsu shrugged, turning away from the window as he glanced at his friend. "But you'd probably be better coming up on deck with me. And if you throw up in here, dammit, you're cleaning it up. I ain't sleeping in a sickroom tonight, so get to grips with it, huh?"

"Yeah, yeah." Maichu opened one eye, grimacing at him. "You're

loving this, aren't you, you jerk?"

"Seems like karma to me." Aoiketsu said lightly. "But you know, the deck is a better place... more air than down here."

"I already made the mistake of stepping on deck, and seeing the sea move." Maichu swallowed hard. "Forget it. I'm staying here. You go up there if it's so interesting. Leave me alone."

"All right, I get it." Aoiketsu grinned. "I'll see you later. Don't die just yet, okay? Because throwing you overboard would be a messy business and a waste of a soldier."

With which parting gambit he left the cabin, his grin widening as he heard his friend cursing him as he did so.

"It might be mean but he teases me like hell all the time." He murmured. "Payback is sweet."

"Well, so there's one of Hyoushin's brave army who isn't caught by the rock of the tide?"

As he reached the deck itself, the smooth, distinct tones broke through his thoughts and he paused, turning to face the speaker with a wary frown on his face. The assassin from the West sat on a wooden bench, his quiver at his side as he busied himself with sharpening an arrow. He eyed Aoiketsu with a mixture of interest and amusement, and at the searching look in his eyes, the soldier's eyes narrowed.

"What do you mean?" He asked quietly, and Miramu shrugged, spreading his hands.

"Seems land soldiers don't do well at sea." He said flippantly. "But you seem to be all right with it. I imagined that more men of the East would be comfortable with water travel, considering your patron beast, but I guess I was wrong. Aside from Hyoushin, you seem to be the only one who's none the worse for wear."

A faint, derisive smile touched his lips.

"And as we all know, nothing phases Hyoushin."

Aoiketsu eyed the man with wary dislike. The rumours had already spread among the soldiers in the barracks about the Western assassin that would be accompanying them, and looking at him, Aoiketsu was certain that this was an individual they should be careful of. His indigo eyes glittered with something beyond ordinary interest, and, despite his evident youth, there was an air of danger about him that put the young soldier on his guard.

There was silence between them for a moment, then Miramu offered a smile.

“You’re Kaiga Aoiketsu, isn’t that right?” He asked conversationally, and Aoiketsu’s frown deepened. Slowly he nodded.

“Yes. What of it?”

“Nothing at all.” Miramu ran an interested gaze over him, making him feel like some kind of prize in the market place, and he bristled.

“Stop staring at me like that!”

“I like to get the measure of my companions. There’s no need to be so abrupt.” Miramu said evenly. “I’m on your side — or had you forgotten?”

He winked.

“Just because I was born in the West, it doesn’t mean that our interests and intentions on this trip are not the same, Aoiketsu.”

“So why *would* you help Kutou?” Aoiketsu dropped down onto the empty bench, eying his companion warily as he took in the assassin’s swarthy, nonchalant appearance and the searching, intense indigo eyes. “What’s in it for you, bar money? I know who you are — *what* you are. We all do. You’re an assassin from Sairou who kills to order, and there must be a lot of people in the West who are out for your blood because of it. I don’t understand it — why risk your life to help the Emperor succeed in his quest?”

“Why not?” Miramu shrugged his shoulders, pausing in the sharpening of his arrow as he met the young soldier’s gaze. “Why do you?”

“Because I’m loyal to my Emperor.” Aoiketsu said immediately. “I’m a soldier and I do as my Commander instructs. That’s how I’m trained and that’s what I do.”

“So you’re a soulless drone?” Miramu arched an eyebrow. “No thoughts of your own in your head? I thought your name was Blue Blood, soldier. Not Yellow Heart.”

“I’m not a coward.” Aoiketsu bristled. “And of course I have my own thoughts. I want Kutou to be peaceful, and I’ll do what it takes to get there. But Kutou is my land. I’m bound to it irrevocably. I don’t understand why you’d abandon Sairou and even lead us to the Byakko treasure? I don’t know if we can trust you.”

“I don’t know if you can either, sometimes.” Miramu said

philosophically. “But such are the gambles that comprise life, Kaiga Aoiketsu.”

He frowned, fixing the younger man with another scrutinous gaze, and despite himself Aoiketsu felt uneasy.

“Now what?” He demanded. “You’re not testing your technology on me, so don’t even think it! I told you, I know what kind of a creature you are — you can’t fool me with smiles while you hide poisoned arrows behind your back.”

“Relax.” Miramu snorted. “I don’t waste my poison on worthless causes. Besides, I’ve no impulse to kill you. Being irritated by someone isn’t much of a motive and I prefer to kill only for financial gain, not for mere comfort reasons. You’re safe enough — while I’m in Kutou’s pay, I won’t be slaying any of you.”

He smiled, a predatorial glint entering his gaze.

“You know, Aoi-kun, you speak so patriotically for the East.” He reflected. “Are you so sure that you’ve pledged yourself to the right country?”

“What does that mean?” Aoiketsu demanded, and Miramu shrugged, gesturing casually in his direction with the point of his arrow. Aoiketsu flinched back, glaring at him.

“Hey! Watch what you’re doing with that!”

“My apologies.” Miramu smirked. “From the rumours *I*’ve heard, I understand you have something of an issue with spilling blood?”

“Explain what you mean, about my loyalties.” Aoiketsu snapped coldly. “Stop talking in riddles and stop patronising me. You’re not so very much older than I am — so speak plainly!”

“Plainly, he says.” Miramu’s lips curled into a smile and he shrugged. “Very well. You preach about the future of Kutou’s peace and how you’d give your life to achieve it. But you look at me with the seiran eyes of a Westerner, Aoiketsu. A man not unlike myself, born in the desert lands. Are you so very sure that your roots are in Kutou? It would be a shame for you to throw your life away in battle for the wrong country, now wouldn’t it?”

“I’m Kaiga Aoiketsu. My mother was Kaiga Ruiren and I was born at the Palace in Kutou’s capital city.” Aoiketsu protested hotly. “So what if my eyes are blue? It’s not like there’s never been anyone born in the East who had blue eyes before! It does happen, you know — you don’t have a divine right to it, in the West!”

Miramu's amusement seemed to increase at this, and he nodded.

"Indeed." He murmured. "On the Eastern borders, and in the dead lands that were once the province of the cursed Hin. I know Kutou as well as I know my own land now, Aoiketsu. There are places which remind me very much of home, it's true. But all the people who live along that stretch originally came from the land of sand in search of the riches brought by the dragon of the sea. They are Westerners, just as I am. And I would wager you were one of them — a man of the tribal lands, or at the very least, the son of a settler."

He tilted his head on one side.

"But wait, how can that be?" He asked slyly. "You're the son of the Kaiga family, aren't you? One of the deepest rooted family trees, before the Shougun of Kutou wiped them out. Quite a mystery then, isn't it? How a couple of such pure Eastern blood should spawn a son with such beautiful indigo eyes...?"

"Why are you baiting me?" Aoiketsu demanded. "My eyes — my heritage — are none of your damn business."

"Because it's fun. No other reason." Miramu shrugged. "I like to create doubt in people's minds. Life isn't worth living unless there's uncertainty. That split second before someone enters the oblivion of death, not knowing what they're going towards or if they're even ready to leave this world behind. One day, I suppose, I'll know those things myself — but there's a certain monotony in knowing your fate and your life's future from day to day. I compensate for it by creating questions in the minds of others. Call it deputising, if you will — life can get very dull, without questions."

"You are insane." Aoiketsu decided, and Miramu chuckled, nodding his head.

"Possibly." He acknowledged. "That might even be interesting, you know. Insanity. At least it would be some form of release."

"Why are you so cocky anyway? From what I heard, you go round saying you can't be killed — why do you think that?" Aoiketsu demanded. "Someone could stab you in the back tonight — how can you be so nonchalant, doing the job you do? An assassin must have a zillion enemies wanting his blood."

"You ask a lot of questions of me, but you're unwilling to comment on the ones in your own life." Miramu remarked softly. "Isn't that a touch hypocritical, Aoi-kun?"

"Aoiketsu." Aoiketsu snapped. "And fair is fair. What's to stop me

killing you while you're sleeping? You're far too damn sure of yourself and it's irritating."

"Do you know what Miramu means, Aoiketsu?" Miramu met his companion's gaze with cool indigo eyes and for a moment Aoiketsu saw what the man had meant about the likeness between their eye colour. He frowned, shaking his head, and Miramu smiled, a cold, humourless smile as he glanced at his sharpened arrowhead. He adjusted his grip, then carefully scraped three characters on the grimy floor.

"My name." He said softly. "As given me by my mother, poor wench, when she had the misfortune to bear me into this world. You read, I trust? You are a soldier, so I can't be sure... but I presume you know your letters."

"Of course I do. Don't be so condescending." Aoiketsu retorted. "I can read just fine, thank you — I was properly schooled, and not all soldiers are illiterates!"

"Sore point is it? My apologies." Laughter danced once more in Miramu's eyes and he shrugged. "Fine then. Tell me what my name means."

"To see a pleasing dream." Aoiketsu frowned. "What does that have to do with killing people?"

"Nothing." Miramu shook his head, drawing the arrow sharply through the characters as he scribed three more in the dust. "I find it more appropriate to write it... this way."

"Without future. Mira'mu." Aoiketsu's brows knitted together. "Aside from looking ugly and disjointed, what does that signify?"

"When I was fourteen, Aoi, someone told me what my life would be." Miramu tossed the arrow back into his quiver, sitting back against the wall. "In the eyes and words of a ten year old girl, I learnt that there would come a day when I would either kill or be killed. That day has not yet come. The prophesies of that child always come true — no matter how I fight to avoid it. And on that day, I will not be the killer. Therefore I will surely be the killed."

He smiled wryly.

"I don't fear it." He added matter-of-factly. "I've brought enough death not to fear it in the slightest. But if that day is to come, I can't die yet, now can I? To face a certain opponent in a certain battle on a certain day — that is my destiny. My future. My life. 'Without future' is the truth of my existence. I had no purpose coming into this world

except to cause suffering, and I shall, no doubt, leave it in the exact same way. Such is the curse of living, soldier. We are not all noble souls fighting with the freedom of our country at heart. Some of us fight simply to fill time, and kill simply as a means to an end. So now you know, don't you? Why Miramu is willing to fight for Kutou. Kutou is paying, and I have no reason to act other than that. Nothing else exists in my life. Time and money, that's all I keep with me. Until they both run out, I'll keep living this life."

"You..." Aoiketsu stared, and Miramu chuckled at his expression.

"Ah, are you going to find pity for me now?" He asked. "Save it, Aoi-kun. Believe me, I'm not worth your or anyone's pity. I do what I do without shame and without guilt. And I will do so until I no longer have life in me to do it. Such is Miramu's fate. End of story."

"This prophet... this child who told you those things... who was she?" Aoiketsu demanded.

"Who was she?" Miramu echoed, and for a moment he didn't answer. Then he nodded, spreading his hands.

"The one you and your men go to seek." He said softly. "The one who guards Byakko's Shinzahou. Toroki."

"Toroki." Aoiketsu whispered. "The Seishi of Byakko? She... sees the future?"

"The future, the past, everything inbetween." Miramu nodded. "She's worse than a curse, Aoiketsu, because her words are always proven true. No matter how much you fight it, the tendrils of her visions catch you in the end."

He shrugged.

"Is it really life, if you have it all mapped out beforehand?" He wondered.

"So that's how you know where the Shinzahou is." Aoiketsu realised. Miramu nodded.

"And you want us to take the treasure as what, revenge? For binding you into this prediction you think you can't escape?"

"You can think that, if you like. I don't mind." Miramu shrugged his shoulders. "The truth is that I have no faith in Byakko or his methods and trinkets. It would bring me nothing but pleasure to have his treasure ripped from the Western lands and used in a rival's ceremony once again. He deserves such a humiliation — and after all, the girl is a slave to that mirror and her power because of the will of the Tiger.

To have the Shinzahou removed would be to give her freedom, would it not?"

He grimaced.

"I cannot abide people whose lives are served only for the good of a cause, not for the good of living." He said frankly. "If they knew what it was to truly not have life, they wouldn't waste their time in such a pointless way. In the aura of that damn mirror, Toroki's power is increased. Do you realise, Aoiketsu, what it is to suffer the futures of everyone, not only yourself?"

"But... are you wanting to hurt this Toroki, or help her?" Aoiketsu was confused, and Miramu's lips twitched into another strange smile.

"Both." He admitted. "I hate her and I pity her. She is the one I will never kill, Aoiketsu... because if I do, I will be fulfilling her prediction and making her right. So I will not face her — nor even speak one word to her, if I can avoid it. I will not kill her and I will not let her kill me. If I can defy Byakko's evil power then my life will have been worth something at least... the proof that at least living and dying is someone's choice, not determined by the stars."

"You really are a weird guy, you know." Aoiketsu reflected, and Miramu nodded.

"Doubtless." He agreed.

"Why are you telling me all this?"

"Who knows?" Miramu shrugged. "Perhaps I see in you a kindred spirit, because of those beautiful blue eyes of yours."

He reached up to touch Aoiketsu's cheek mockingly, and the soldier snorted, pulling away.

"You don't answer straight." He snapped. "And you're mad if you think we have anything in common."

"Suit yourself." Miramu seemed unconcerned by his hostility, which annoyed Aoiketsu even more.

"Why are you *really* telling me?" He demanded.

"Because you seem to think I'm a danger to you and your friends, Aoi-kun. And believe me, nothing is less important in my mind than the slaying of Kutou soldiers." Miramu said evenly. "You don't even register on my radar. I have other goals — other reasons for undertaking this trip that you can't possibly hope to understand."

"Such as...?"

“Those things are no business of a boy who swears himself to the God of the East.”

“But you already said you don’t care anything for Byakko or his power!”

“True enough.” Miramu inclined his head. “And I feel the same way about your Seiryuu, and all of the damned Beast Gods and the slaves they create. Living under the shadow of ‘Celestial Warrior’ is nothing but a glorified form of slavery, Aoiketsu. Just as you serve your Commander blindly. Your loyalty is not simply courage. It’s cowardice, too. To have someone else take responsibility for your life and your choices. The Beast Gods create such slaves and as human beings, we deify them. It makes me sick.”

“You’re getting more and more obtuse by the second.” Aoiketsu sighed. “So you’re doing this because you hate the fact people have faith in the four Gods?”

“No, Aoi. I’m doing it for money, pure and simple.” Miramu said softly. “But if I can relieve Toroki of the treasure in the meantime, so much the better.”

“You come from the same village as her, don’t you?” Aoiketsu realised.

“That was a fine piece of deduction. Yes, I do.” Miramu agreed, a faint smile touching his lips. “Though I believe both her parents live, she no longer lives with them and so we will not be going there. I have no wish to return, anyway. I left the place after slitting the throat of my own father, and I swore then that I would never go back.”

“You killed your own father?” Aoiketsu flinched back in surprise, and Miramu nodded.

“So would you have, if you’d had the father I did.” He said matter-of-factly. Then he smiled, a strange expression lighting up his features.

“But then, maybe you do.” He added cryptically. “Since you are a son of the West in body, that’s for sure — even if your soul is bound to the East.”

“I am not from the West! I was born in the Eastern lands — how many times do I have to tell you that!” Aoiketsu exclaimed. “Ask Hyoushin-sama, or the Emperor. My mother was granted sanctuary at the palace and I was born there after the war with Kounan. How much more Eastern can I be?”

“This is a sore spot for you, I can tell.” Miramu said smoothly. “I’m

glad to know it. You should never fear your doubts, Aoi-kun. They may yet keep you alive.”

“Talking sense with you is impossible.” Aoiketsu muttered, and Miramu laughed.

“Probably.” He acknowledged. “You are fortunate, Kaiga Aoiketsu, that you don’t understand. If you saw the world the way I do...”

He paused, shaking his head.

“You are too young and too naive.” He reflected. “But perhaps I envy you those things a little bit.”

He tilted his head on one side, shooting him an enigmatic smile.

“You are not Hyoushin’s man, nor the Emperor’s... you are your own.” He said softly. “Soldier of the East with the blue eyes of the West. Remember that.”

“I am not going to betray either one of them — to you or to anyone.” Aoiketsu said hotly, and Miramu laughed.

“I’m sure you’re not.” He admitted. “You’re idealistic, and idealism gets men killed, Aoi-kun. Keep it in mind... one day you may have use for such advice, even if now your mind and body are too charged with patriotism to see the cold realities of fighting on someone else’s word.”

“Are you causing trouble again, Miramu?”

Before Aoiketsu could find a suitable response, the cool, impassive tones of the Meihi commander broke through the conversation, and Aoiketsu gazed up at him in clear relief at the interruption.

“Hyoushin.” Miramu offered him a smile. “Did noone teach you that it’s impolite to interrupt someone else’s conversation?”

Hyoushin eyed him long and hard for a moment, but did not reply. Instead he turned his gaze to Aoiketsu, sending him a searching glance.

“You are unaffected by the sea travel, Aoiketsu?” He asked softly, and Aoiketsu shook his head.

“I’m fine, sir.” He said evenly. “Maichu’s holed himself up in our cabin, claiming he’s dying — but I feel all right.”

“Then I have a task for you.” Hyoushin shot Miramu another glance, and Aoiketsu saw the faintest flicker of ice in the Commander’s amethyst eyes. “I’m sure our assassin friend can spare

you.”

“I don’t have anything more to say to him anyway.” Aoiketsu said frankly. “I think he’s crazy.”

Miramu let out a peal of laughter at this, getting to his feet and hoisting his quiver onto his back.

“I can take a hint.” He reflected. “But really, Hyoushin, you have some interesting souls with you, on this voyage. Kaiga Aoiketsu, huh? Such an interesting boy, with such interesting seiran eyes.”

With that he was gone, and a brief look of annoyance touched Hyoushin’s expression.

“That man is not someone you should spend too much time listening to.” He said quietly. “He is useful to the Emperor but he is not an ally of Kutou, nor should you trust him, Aoiketsu.”

“I don’t. Like I said, he’s crazy.” Aoiketsu responded frankly. “And deluded. He kept talking about doubt and uncertainty and how it’s the only thing that makes you alive.”

“Mm.” Hyoushin’s brows knitted together. “But if he can help us locate the Shinzahou we seek... I do not wish to cause bloodshed in Sairou, if it can be avoided. However, with a companion such as him... we shall see how things pan out.”

“He said that he and Toroki grew up together. In the same village.” Aoiketsu remembered. “And that he wants to take the treasure from her because of that. Because she predicted his death a long time ago, and he wants to prove her wrong — or something. I think he thinks that if he takes the Shinzahou away from her, he can break that prophesy, or something like it. That’s what he said, anyway.”

“Indeed.” Interest glimmered in the depths of Hyoushin’s eyes. “Then perhaps there is a greater logic to his sudden affiliation with Kutou than I imagined. If he has a personal association with Toroki, it might explain his unwillingness to face her, also. That was well discovered, Aoiketsu.”

“It wasn’t on purpose. He just told me.” Aoiketsu admitted. “Sir... he said something else, too.”

“Such as?”

“He commented... on my eyes.” Aoiketsu raised his gaze to his Commander’s, and Hyoushin frowned.

“What is wrong with your eyes, Aoiketsu?” He asked softly. “They

function properly, do they not?"

"Yes, of course, but..."

"But?"

"Sir... they're blue. They're like his." Aoiketsu confessed. "And he says... I'm from the West. Not from the East at all. Because I have blue eyes."

"Then he is a fool." Hyoushin's lips flickered into a faint, amused smile. "You were born at the palace, Aoiketsu. I can testify to that, and to knowing your mother, also. You have never been to Sairou, and you were certainly not born of Western blood. Perhaps your ancestors were immigrants — as mine were, into the East. Such things are not uncommon, for in times of peace, Kutou is a prosperous, fertile land and it holds many attractions. But just as I am a man of Kutou, so are you. Both of us were born there. And our loyalties quite properly belong to the East — regardless of the colour of our eyes."

At this, Aoiketsu grinned ruefully, running his fingers through his dark hair as he nodded.

"You're right. I'm sorry." He admitted. "I guess he just shook me, when he said it."

"That's the kind of thing men like Miramu do." Hyoushin said evenly. "Do not let him bait you. You are a man of the East as much — no, perhaps more — than some of your fellows. Your dedication to your country and your Emperor has not gone unnoticed, and you should not concern yourself with the ramblings of madmen. You are one of Kintsusei-sama's trusted guard, and one of my most loyal men. That is all you need concern yourself with. That, and the successful completion of this mission."

"I guess so." Aoiketsu nodded resolutely. "All right. For the sake of Kutou and all the people there — I understand. I'm sorry, Commander — I won't let him throw me again."

"Good." Hyoushin eyed him for a moment, and with a jolt Aoiketsu almost thought he saw a glimmer of affection in the amethyst eyes. "And with that in mind, I do have a task for you. Follow me — just because we are afloat doesn't mean there aren't things we can do in the meantime. I have a sea chart from Kikei, and it is scribed with complicated Chinese characters. I am not as skilled in the letters of Kutou's dialect as I could be — but I know that you had excellent tuition in this subject when you were a boy. And I'd like you to translate the text."

“Oh. Of course.” Aoiketsu looked surprised. “If you want. I didn’t know you had trouble with kanji, sir.”

“I can read enough to get comfortably by.” Hyoushin said with a shrug, as he led the way towards the cabin. “But it is not my first language, nor the most natural alphabet for me to learn. Chinese has many, many characters and I was a decidedly late starter. So yes, I have my limitations.”

“I see.” Aoiketsu looked thoughtful, then, “I hadn’t thought about it. You speak Kutou’s dialect perfectly — without even an accent. I didn’t know... it wasn’t your first language.”

“These days it is my only language.” Hyoushin’s lips twisted into an empty smile. “But to speak and to read are two different things. And as I said, the map is of some age. But I understood from Maichu that you read the ancient text in Suiko’s cave... so I’d like you to try your hand at this, too.”

“All right.” Aoiketsu reddened slightly as he realised how close he had come to prying into his Commander’s past. “I mean, I’ll try.”

He spread his hands.

“If I can help, I will.”

Chapter 4

Chapter Three

“I’m still not happy about this.”

Hikari cast Jin a doubtful look, biting her lip as her gaze flitted from his amused smile to the chestnut beast that stood patiently at the end of the leather thongs he held in his hand. “That’s a horse, Jin — you know how I feel about getting onto one of those things. Isn’t there another option? Can’t we walk it? Or, you know, get a... whatever your equivalent is of a bus in this world?”

“A bus?” Shishi emerged from the stable at that moment, casting her friend a startled look. “What’s one of those when it’s at home, Hiki?”

“A form of transport that’s not likely to bite you or give you fleas.” Hikari sighed, casting the placid animal another hesitant look. “I really, really don’t want to ride anything, you know — it’s okay for you but I’ve never been on a horse before.”

“Now’s a good time to start, then.” Shishi said pragmatically, offering her a playful grin. “Isn’t that right, Jin? No time like the present to give it a shot, huh?”

“Shishi’s right.” Jin nodded, patting the neck of the horse absently as the beast whinnied, nuzzling at his waist as if hunting for some kind of treat. “Besides, this is the quietest horse on the mountain, I swear. All the kids learn to ride on her. Hell, even Shishi did, in the beginning. She won’t buck or rear or bite you — she’s not that kind of animal. Are you, girl?”

He cast the horse a grin, and the horse nickered in response, as if understanding the bandit’s words.

“See, quite safe.” Shishi leant up against the wall of the ramshackle wooden building. “Listen, Hiki... it’s like this. We don’t have a lot of time. We’ve spent the last few days hanging around here because Chichiri wanted to try and train your magic up some before we left. But we know that people from Kutou have already left to go to Sairou, right? So we’re playin’ catch up. Or we will be, if we ain’t careful. You gotta get over this stupid sissy thing you have with horses. If we ride, we’ll get through the mountains much more quickly.”

“Not if I fall off and get trampled.” Hikari chewed on her lip some more as she eyed the animal warily. “I can’t get up there, and I’ll fall right off. I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“Aren’t there horses in your world, Hikari?” Jin looked startled, and Hikari nodded.

“Yes.” She admitted. “But not many of them live in the centre of Tokyo. I’m sorry. I really... really don’t think I can handle it. Even if it was shot full of ritalin, I don’t think I’d stay on by myself.”

“Ritalin?” Shishi’s brows knitted. “Look, even if you haven’t been on a horse before, we have to take some risks. Right? We have to get at least to the border by tonight. Hopefully beyond it. I’ve looked at Chichiri’s map an’ so has Jin. The mountains are kinda cold at night, an’ barren, with wolves an’ other wild creatures. You’ll be glad of a horse, an’ this Hengei town we’re headin’ for is goin’ to be a few hours even ridin’.”

Hikari shook her head slowly, and Jin pursed his lips, eying her keenly as he did so.

“We could compromise.” He suggested at length, and Hikari shot him a startled look.

“Compromise?” She echoed suspiciously. “What do you mean, compromise?”

“Well, Shishi’s right. We don’t have time to trek through the mountains an’ I don’t want us to be campin’ out in wild wolf country.” Jin shrugged. “As she said, it ain’t just wolves, neither. It ain’t a safe place to be spendin’ the night. So we have to go on horse-back — at least until we reach Hengei. We’ll leave the creatures there an’ walk it after that, if you like. But for this leg, we gotta. It’s not an option... we gotta.”

“So what do you suggest, then?” Hikari asked warily. “Jin...”

“You ride with me.” Jin shrugged, spreading his hands. “I don’t mind, an’ when Shishi was small, I used to ride with her till she got her balance an’ her bearings. It’s not difficult an’ I wouldn’t let you fall off... I promise.”

“Jin.” Shishi raised an eyebrow, and much to Hikari’s bemusement Jin shot the young lion cub a dark look, shaking his head firmly.

“Shut up, Shishi.” He said frankly. “It’s a solution to the problem. Well, Hikari? What about it? I’ve been ridin’ since I was six or seven an’ I ain’t bad at it. You’ll be safe enough, I promise.”

“I...” Hikari faltered, eying the horse one last time. Then she sighed.

“There’s no other way?”

“By horse is the fastest transport you’ll get through the mountains, Hiki.” Shishi reflected. “You want to get Byakko’s Shinzahou, don’t you?”

“Yes.” Hikari took a deep breath, then, slowly, she nodded. “All... all right. I guess... I’ll ride with you, Jin. So long as you swear not to let me go. I don’t like the idea — they’re so high up and unpredictable and I really don’t want to be thrown off or bitten or trampled or stampeded or any of those things. But if you promise not to let that happen... I... I guess I... I’ll do that.”

“Hey, bandit’s honour.” Jin’s eyes twinkled at this. “I promise, Hikari. Nothing’ll happen to you.”

Shishi snorted at this, and Jin sent her another pointed look.

“I already told you once to shut your trap.” He said bluntly. “Go make yourself useful an’ grab the travel bag, will you? We don’t want to forget anythin’, and now this is all decided, we gotta kit up an’ get ready to go.”

“You know, you sound like you’re trying to be Kashira all of a sudden.” Shishi reflected, and Jin cuffed her playfully across the top of her head.

“Stop it.” He ordered. “I’m in charge on this trip. An’ I ain’t tryin’ to sound like Kashira — but you know I’m right. The sooner we get to Sairou, the sooner we get back. Right? The sooner we get this treasure, the sooner we have a chance o’ summoning Suzaku, the sooner all this is fixed. Okay? So wastin’ time ain’t on the agenda. Understood?”

“Yes sir!” Shishi saluted sharply, offering him a cheeky smile as she darted off to do his bidding. Jin sighed, shaking his head slowly as he ran his fingers through his thick dark hair.

“Sometimes she’s such a pain.” He muttered.

“Have you guys had some kind of a fight or something?” Hikari asked curiously, and Jin looked startled.

“A fight? No. Why would you think that?”

“You keep telling her to shut up every ten seconds.” Hikari shrugged. “And she seems to be laughing at you about something. I

wondered. Did she beat you in a sword practice or something? Send you falling into a lake? You just both seem weird this morning. That's all."

"No, nothing like that." Jin looked sheepish, shaking his head. "Although you have a scary accurate impression of Shishi an' me already, you know that? No, I think it's jus' travel nerves. You know, this is a big deal for the both o' us. We're responsible for your safety — me especially. Kashira's trustin' me more than he ever has before, an' I hope I can live up to it, that's all."

"I think you can." Hikari offered him a smile. "I've seen you and Shishi practice with swords in the last few days, and I know that you're as good as people have said. Both of you. I think I'm safe with you."

"You haven't tried to wield Hotohori-sama's sword since Reizeitei-sama gave it to you yesterday." Jin observed, and Hikari shook her head.

"I'm afraid to hurt someone. Probably myself." She confessed. "It's just another thing I know nothing about."

"But the same applied to your Ma, right?" Jin reminded her. "An' didn't Chichiri-san say she'd wielded it against one o' Seiryuu's Seishi?"

"Yeah... but I'm not Mum." Hikari sighed. "She's impulsive and impetuous and she doesn't always think about things from that point of view. I mean, she dives right in, if someone is in trouble... and she wouldn't sit and doubt and worry about it like me. I'm not Suzaku no Miko, Jin. I'm just a vessel for some kind of magic that I can't even access or control most of the time. There's the difference. Mum was actually special. I'm just scared of horses, wolves and poisoned arrows. That's all."

"I don't agree, you know." Jin leant back against the wood frame of the stable, looping the horse's reins absently around the post as he gazed at her. "You've dived right in to help Chichiri-san an' Meikyo so far. I think you sound pretty much as strong as Suzaku no Miko to me. An' even if you ain't her — noone wants you to be, you know. You're Suzaku no Shinzahou an' you're goin' to help us save Kounan."

"But to do that, I guess I have to find a way to be Suzaku no Miko." Hikari admitted. "And that's hard. Mum must have been really, really resolved to do it... that's where we differ. I'm afraid of a lot of things, and it's not really me who does those things. I didn't save Chichiri or Meikyo. Suzaku did. He used me, but it was him, not me. I told you,

it's like something else inside of me, telling me how to act... making it impossible not to. It's not Sukunami Hikari. Sukunami Hikari is a coward who's not much good at anything. If I didn't have Suzaku inside of me, I'd be useless to you right now, too."

"Hey, snap out of it." Jin grinned, giving her a little shake. "I don't believe that an' neither should you. We gotta have faith in this, right? When it boils down to it, Hikari, I'm jus' a bandit. Nowt special. The spawn of some whore an' God knows who. Shishi's the daughter of a Seishi, but she ain't a Seishi herself. She's a bandit too, but she ain't blessed. But the both of us, we'll do what we have to do to help find this, for Kounan's sake. Ain't you gonna hoe in an' do that too? Or are you gonna give up before we leave? Because that don't sound like the Hikari we're gettin' to know."

"I'm really confused about who Hikari is at the moment." Hikari confessed. "But when you put it like that, I guess you're right. Sorry, Jin. I didn't mean to sound so defeatist."

She offered a faint smile.

"It must be the thought of getting on the horse." She added, and Jin laughed.

"Don't worry. You'll get the hang of it, and I won't let you get hurt." He assured her. "You can trust me, I told you."

"I know. I do trust you. Both you and Shishi. It's me I'm not sure of." Hikari shrugged. "But I guess... when we were in Hokkan, I did sense where the Shinzahou was. I was drawn to it — and to Koutakusan and his family because of it. Maybe it'll be the same in Sairou. Maybe I can be a Shinzahou detector, while you guys worry about how we're getting from A to B."

"That's more like it." Jin patted her on the shoulder, nodding his head. "Right. We're a team... that means we don't all have the same tasks. It'll be fine, you know. We'll find Toroki, sweet-talk her, and come home. Simple as that. No problem. Right?"

"Right." Hikari echoed doubtfully, then she caught his eye, and laughed. "Okay, I'll try and make that sound a little more convinced. *Right*. We'll do this. Fleas and horses aside... we will."

"We will." Jin echoed, and for a moment Hikari thought she could see a faint flicker of apprehension in his tones. Then it was gone, as he gathered himself, nodding his head. "Right. When Shishi gets back, we'll kit up the horses an' then we'll go. I want to get past the trickiest tracks before it gets too late in the afternoon, an' Chichiri reckons we

can make it to Hengei by nightfall. I wanna prove him right.”

“I wonder what Sairou is going to be like.” Hikari frowned, and for a moment a shiver touched her spine as she remembered Taiitsukun’s words about Amefuri.

“Are you cold?” Jin shot her a startled look, and she glanced up at him, shaking her head.

“No. I’m fine.” She responded. “Just thinking. That’s all.”

“Well, don’t spook yourself with worryin’ about what’s to come, okay?” Jin winked at her. “It’ll be all right. Shishi an’ me, we’ll take care of you. I promise.”

“You have no idea how good it is to have my feet on dry land again.”

Maichu gazed across the uneven skyline of the Sairou port with a smile of relief, folding his hands across his chest as he did so. “Aoi, I swear, if I ever have to get on a boat again it will be too soon.”

“I still think you’re a wimp.” Aoiketsu said unsympathetically. “Most of the others got over themselves after a day or so — you shut yourself in the cabin pretty much the whole way, like some helpless baby. I never knew you were such a weakling, Maichu.”

“Shut your face.” Maichu glared at him. “Now you know what it’s like to have you as a training partner — when you about chuck up your guts at the first sign of blood.”

“The difference being?”

“Soldiers don’t need to get on boats to fight their battles.” Maichu said frankly. “But it’s a bit of a shitty habit, if you can’t fight for fear of a little gore.”

“With any luck, Maichu, we won’t be experiencing any gore on this trip.” Hyoushin’s soft, measured tones broke through the soldiers’ banter and both men turned to face their commander, sheepish expressions on their faces. At their glance, Hyoushin smiled slightly, nodding his head.

“We are here to retrieve the Shinzahou belonging to Byakko.” He said quietly. “And we have been charged with preserving the life of the one who guards it. This is very important... there is to be no gratuitous violence towards the people of Sairou. Your Emperor does not wish to start a war with the Western lands.”

“Yes sir.” Aoiketsu nodded. “We’ll be careful.”

“I don’t like this place.” At that moment, Suiko emerged from the ship that still bobbed lazily in the calm waters of the dock. “It’s dry and full of dust and sand.”

“Well, it is Sairou.” Maichu reflected. “They’re kind of famous for dust and sand, Suiko-sama.”

“And I’m a *water*-mage.” Suiko pouted, hopping neatly down onto the ground beside them as she did so, her unusual azure waves of hair flittering in the wind. “I belong in Kutou. I’m not designed to trek through nasty places like this.”

“The Emperor’s order is an order.” Hyoushin said impassively. “Where is Miramu? We can’t leave without our guide, and I’d rather keep him well in our sight.”

“Your trust in me is a great comfort.” Miramu’s voice came from behind them and they turned, seeing the assassin standing watching them with a rueful smile on his face. “But you needn’t worry. I’m right here, Hyoushin. I haven’t run off into the scrubland just yet.”

“Where did you come from?” Aoiketsu demanded. “You weren’t with us a minute ago!”

“On the contrary, Aoiketsu, I have been here all the time.” Miramu shook his head, tut-tutting. “Your observation skills are poor for a man who professes to be a soldier. And I had heard you were better than that — you surprise me.”

“If you had been here, I would have seen you.” Aoiketsu shook his head, and Miramu chuckled.

“I heard you and your friend here discussing the joys of seasickness and battle.” He said lightly. “Hyoushin, perhaps it would be a good idea to teach your men a better awareness of potential enemies? You never know when they might face an ambush — and I am supposed to put my faith in these people for my protection as we move through Sairou?”

“Is *he* coming with us, Hyoushin?” Before Aoiketsu could respond, Suiko cast Hyoushin a quizzical look, looping her arms around the Meihi’s shoulders as she spoke. “I don’t like him. He’s creepy and he belongs to this horrible, dusty land. I don’t like him at all.”

“This mission is not about liking.” A flicker of irritation flared in Hyoushin’s amethyst eyes and he grasped the mage loosely around the wrist, disentangling himself from her casual embrace. “And you are

here as we all are to complete Kintsusei-sama's mission. Or have you forgotten that you swore fealty to him when he and Kikei rose you from the flame, Suiko? Remember who possesses Seiryuu's Shinzahoo."

"You're so mean." Suiko sighed, shaking her head as she shot him a reproachful look. "Cold, just like the North."

"What is this place anyway, Commander?" Aoiketsu gazed across at the narrow network of streets and alleys that he could see leading into the busy, bustling trader's dock. "A merchant port? Something like that?"

"Yes." Hyoushin confirmed. "A place called Kaidou, I believe... Sairou's principle trading port."

"You have done your research." Miramu's eyes glittered with amusement and he nodded. "Yes. This is Kaidou. And since your Emperor had the foresight to conceal this ship of yours as a merchant trading ship, noone will be at all surprised. This town is always full of strangers — foreigners — and they don't bother to check identification or papers on any of the import gates. Sairou is, after all, under Byakko's protection."

He snorted derisively.

"Such a premise makes men foolish and careless." He added. "But it suits our purpose. Noone will question our movements."

He cast Suiko a sidelong glance.

"Although that one should maybe cover her face." He added. "Because even you look more like a normal human being than she does, Hyoushin. Even in this land of peace — it may be hard to explain why you have a witch in accompaniment."

"I am not a witch, I'm a mage, you rude man!" Suiko reacted to this, anger flickering in her strange sapphire eyes as she twitched her fingers together. "And I'll show you exactly what you're messing with, if you continue to be mean to me!"

"Suiko." Hyoushin held up his hands, shaking his head. "Repulsive as the man may be, we will not fight with Miramu on this trip. He has been charged as we have, with obtaining Byakko's treasure. And unfortunately we need his help."

Miramu chuckled.

"I'm sorry, Lady of the East." He said mockingly, bowing his head towards her. "We'll have to save our confrontation for another day. I

don't think even the people of Kaidou would overlook a sudden and random flood of their town, now do you?"

Suiko's eyes glittered for a moment, then she tossed her head, turning and flouncing back towards Hyoushin.

"He's so mean to me." She protested. "Why did we have to bring him along?"

Her eyes narrowed, and she turned to send Miramu a poisonous glare.

"He's Byakko's refuse. That's all." She said darkly. "Even the Tiger of the West doesn't want him — we don't need a rogue like him."

At her words, Aoiketsu registered a faint glimmer of something strange in the assassin's gaze, and he frowned, his brows knitting thoughtfully as he tried to work out what in the mage's petulant outburst had caused Miramu to react.

"Does he care more about this land than we think?" He wondered. "Is he a spy? Is he someone we can trust? He's such a strange man... he makes me uneasy."

"Are we going straight ahead, Hyoushin-sama, or are we stopping for food first?" Maichu asked hopefully. "I've barely eaten anything for the past week and I'm starving."

"We have time to take a short break." Hyoushin sent Suiko a wary glance, then nodded his head. "We will have some time trekking through desert land once we pass through Kaidou, and we should replenish our supplies and lay our plans. According to the map, it may be a further day's ride to the next town — and we do not want to be caught without water or food on such a journey."

"So. We're going to Eiroku, are we?" Miramu's lips twitched into an amused smile. "That will be interesting."

"That was the plan." Hyoushin glanced at him. "Why? Is there some reason we should not take that route? You did indicate that we needed to head into the desert proper — am I mistaken?"

"No. Eiroku is the best place to travel to." Miramu shook his head. "It's right on our path. It's just a place that holds certain memories for me, that's all. I haven't been there for some time — it will be nice to see it again."

Hyoushin's eyes narrowed, as if he was trying to work out the meaning in the assassin's words, but at length he shrugged, spreading his hands.

“Then we will find somewhere to stay in Kaidou, and we will gather resources.” He said softly. “Does everyone understand? We are to attract as little unwanted attention as possible. Do not give yourselves away as members of Kutou’s military guard... we do not wish anyone to think we’re here on an errand of aggression.”

“Are we keeping our swords, sir?” Aoiketsu asked, and Hyoushin nodded.

“It would be foolish to be in a strange land without them.” He confirmed. “But act with caution and discretion.”

He turned, glancing at Miramu.

“You know this town, Miramu?”

“Yes, somewhat.” Miramu nodded. “I spent a few days here once, before I travelled to Kutou.”

“Then you must have some idea of somewhere we can stay in safety?”

“If that’s what you want.” Miramu agreed. “I won’t pretend it wouldn’t be nice to rest for a while in familiar ground.”

“Then we will divide.” Hyoushin decided. “Kayu, I want you and Aoiketsu to accompany Miramu and find accomodation. Kayu will report when such suitable accomodation has been found. Maichu, you and the rest of the men will accompany myself to secure resources and arrange for the hiring of horses to ride out into the desert lands first thing in the morning. Is this understood?”

“Yes sir.” Maichu saluted, nodding his head.

“Aoiketsu?” Hyoushin pressed, and Aoiketsu sent the assassin a doubtful glance, but nodded, echoing his friend’s salute.

“Yes, sir.” He agreed. “We’ll do that.”

“What about me, Hyoushin?” Suiko asked softly, sending him a reproachful glance. “Are you going to abandon a pretty young woman here all by herself?”

“You said you didn’t wish to be among the dust and desert, didn’t you?” Hyoushin eyed her impassively. “So stay with the boat. Play with the sea until we return.”

“Stop being so mean to me.” Suiko glared at him. “I’m Seiryuu’s mage, not just someone you can push around, you know! I follow the orders of Lord Kintsusei, not...”

“My word is the word of the Emperor. I am his voice on this trip and the orders I give are the orders given to me.” Hyoushin cut across her quietly. “If you are truly here to help us, Suiko, you will do as you’re bidden.”

“That told her.” Maichu muttered, and Aoiketsu smiled slightly, a rueful look touching his seiran eyes as he nodded his head.

Suiko’s eyes widened at Hyoushin’s tone, and for a moment, it almost looked like she might lose her temper and fling the waves that lapped against the pier up over the side of the walkway. Then she seemed to relax, spreading her hands as she tilted her head on one side, letting out a peal of ethereal laughter.

“You are as cold as ice, man of the North.” She murmured. “Dead to everything, even Seiryuu’s mage. But I still like you. You who are the voice of the Emperor in all things... yes, I like you. And if you are the Emperor’s voice, I will do as you command me.”

Before anyone could react, she had darted across the dock, flinging her arms around the unsuspecting Meihi and taking him completely off guard as she eyed him coquettishly.

“Ice and water are not so different, Hyoushin-sama.” She whispered. “And I can manipulate all water. Do you truly think I can’t manipulate you, too?”

“Let go of me.” Hyoushin gathered his wits, pushing her back as the soldiers looked on, wide-eyed. “If you intend on following my commands, then do as you’re told and stay here. We don’t need a water witch to complete this part of our mission. And you are conspicuous, as Miramu rightly says. You will be safer here at the dock with the ship. Protect it. Do not let anyone not of this party board it. That is your task. Will you accept it?”

“Since it’s *you* that’s asking.” Suiko said playfully, saluting him flipantly as she nodded her head. “Hyoushin-sama.”

Hyoushin sighed, and Aoiketsu could see a mixture of wariness and annoyance in his amethyst eyes. Then, in an instant, it was gone, and he was once more the composed, regimented Commander.

“Then we will reassemble back here when the sun is highest in the sky.” He said softly. “Once we have accomodation, we will plot our route across the Western lands to the Shinzahou, so do not waste time with unnecessary endeavours. We are none of us here for our own pleasure, after all. This is for Kutou’s benefit — keep that in mind and I will see you back here as soon as possible!”

Chapter 5

Chapter Four

“At last. Hengei.”

Hikari scrambled down from the back of Jin’s horse, rubbing her limbs ruefully as her bandit companion dismounted neatly beside her, gathering the beast’s reins in his hands as he cast her an amused look. A short distance away, Shishi had already leapt down from her own steed, watching them with playful impatience.

“We made it, and in good time, too.” She said approvingly. “It’s getting dark, but it’s not pitch black yet. We’ve time to try and find an inn or somewhere to stay — and to stable the horses, too, until we get back from our trip.”

“We’re leaving the horses here? For sure?” Hikari looked hopeful and Shishi snorted, casting her friend a derisive look.

“You wuss.” She said teasingly. “And you didn’t even fall off, so I don’t know what you’re complaining about.”

“It’s bumpy and uncomfortable and I hate heights.” Hikari shivered. “At least I do when you’re galloping along at pace and the only thing stopping you from falling headlong is a strip of leather!”

“In your case, it was *Jin* stopping you from falling headlong. Not the reins.” Shishi pointed out, sending Jin a mischievous look and the older bandit grimaced, cuffing her playfully across the back of the head.

“It’s too late in the day to be that sparky.” He warned her. “What *about* the horses, Shishi? We *are* to leave them here — did Kashira say so?”

“Yes.” Shishi agreed. “That we should stable them in Hengei and do the rest of the trip on foot. Chichiri apparently said that some of the terrain round the desert and the mountains in the scrub is hard going for horses — so it’s better if we walk from hereon in. But he gave me money to pay for their keep.”

She fumbled in her belt, pulling out a leather pouch and holding it up. “See?”

“Don’t wave it around, you idiot.” Jin glared at her. “We’re not on

Reikaku-zan now — use your brain if you don't want to attract every thief in the area?"

"Oh." Shishi looked sheepish, obediently slipping the pouch back into the folds of her clothing. "Sorry. I guess the dust's gettin' to my brain a little."

"What brain?" Hikari teased, and Shishi poked out her tongue.

"Stop being kids a moment and listen up, huh?" Jin was clearly losing patience, and glancing at him, Hikari realised with a jolt how seriously he was taking the responsibility of this trip into the West. "We don't know this town too good, an' the market's already packin' up for the night, so we'd better make tracks unless we want to be stuck out here in an empty city with a duststorm probably on the way. Either of you see any place that looks like an inn?"

"If it's an inn you're wanting, lad, you should cross the square and head into the south quarter." A passing old man paused, catching the end of their conversation as he grinned at them with a gaptoothed smile. He pointed, nodding his head. "That way. There's rooms there, an' travellers are always welcome. First time in Sairou, is it?"

"Yes. Thank you." Jin looked relieved. "Hear that, girls? The Southern quarter is what we want."

"That fits." Shishi grinned. "Thanks, ojisan. Can we stable the horses there too?"

"Sure can." The man nodded. "Friend of mine runs a place not too far from the edge of the quarter, actually... stables an' the rates aren't bad. Have you travelled far?"

"From Kounan." Jin said briefly, and the man grinned.

"Kounan! I haven't been there in years." He said, a nostalgic expression touching his eyes as he let out a sigh. "Mountain path's too difficult now, at my age, but when I was as young and spry as you, I'd be back and forth through those hills. Had to watch those mountain folk, though — stiff they were, sometimes, on taking their toll on the path!"

Hikari cast her companions an amused grin, as Jin and Shishi exchanged looks.

"I've heard that the Reikaku-zan bandits aren't as vicious as some gangs." She said innocently. "But then, I've never fallen foul of their toll before."

"You're from the South too, huh?" The old man peered at her.

“Funny — you don’t look like a southerner to me. But then, nor does the red-head here — I guess Kounan’s got more diverse than I remember, huh?”

He offered his gap-toothed grin again, then,

“My friend’s place is the third one, in the furthest corner.” He added. “Tell them that you come with Shuyo’s recommendation an’ he’ll find you rooms for sure.”

“Thank you, that’s kind of you.” Jin said soberly, bowing his head. “We appreciate your help. Come on, girls. It’s getting dark and the horses are getting restless.”

“So we’re going to trust his advice?” Shishi whispered, as they led the two tired, skittish horses across towards the area that the old man had indicated. “You heard what he said... he used to skip out on toll if he could. What kind of a man do you suppose that makes him?”

“He seemed friendly enough to me.” Hikari shrugged. “Even if he was a bit... strange in the things he said. And he did tell us somewhere we could stay for the night. Sairou’s a peaceful country, right? We shouldn’t worry about people being friendly.”

Jin grinned.

“I think we can probably take his advice. This does look like the right place to come for an inn.” He reflected, gesturing towards the sprawl of taverns and stables that spread out before them as they rounded the corner and entered the quarter itself. “As for what he said about the mountain, it doesn’t surprise me. You heard what he said, right? Back and forth across the mountains. It stands to reason he’d try to avoid the toll.”

“I don’t see why.” Shishi grimaced. “Why’d he be back and forth anyway? Some woman in Kounan he couldn’t keep away from?”

“More likely he was a smuggler.” Jin shrugged his shoulders carelessly. “There used to be a lot of them, once upon a time.”

“Smugglers?” Hikari looked startled. “Really?”

“Yep.” Jin nodded. “Aniki told me about it. His people used to be involved in it, at one time. The trade, I mean. An’ Reikaku-zan was as well, once. When it was really thriving. I mean, we took toll from the smugglers too, but from what Aniki said, they cut deals for protection an’ things like that. A major operation, it was, years ago. All kinds o’ things were shifted over the border, then.”

“Smugglers and bandits... no wonder the mountains are

dangerous.” Hikari murmured, and Jin laughed, shooting her an amused smile. He shook his head.

“Naw. It ain’t so much that way any more.” He reflected. “Stopped, pretty much, before Aniki was even on the mountain. Not really sure why. I know they shifted diamonds an’ other crystals that were mined in Sairou for market in Eiyoun an’ places like that — so I’ve been told, anyway. Perhaps the mine was exhausted — but more like, it got too risky. Government got involved an’ started to clamp down on wantin’ their share of the profits. Plus there was plague in the villages that were involved in the heart of it — decimated the population. So I guess... it just died out.”

“Plague?” Hikari looked alarmed, and Jin nodded.

“No idea what.” He added. “But Aniki said his family all died of it. Why he didn’t is a mystery, I s’pose — but he wound up at Reikaku-zan after an’ there was no smugglin’ under Hakurou-sama’s regime. An’ Kashira ain’t taken it up again, neither. I don’t think he approves of it, t’be honest. He doesn’t see it as our line of work.”

“Damn right it’s not.” Shishi said hotly. “We’re bandits, we’re not sneak-thieves who creep around the place with stolen goods! We take toll an’ we put it to good use! Reikaku-zan isn’t like other mountains — of course Papa doesn’t believe in us smugglin’!”

“I think it sounds fun.” Jin reflected. “But I guess you’re right. The villages round Reikaku-zan rely on us for protection an’ support, especially since Kaou-zan gained so much influence under that bastard Kieron. So I guess it’s better, the way things are.”

“I can’t imagine Tasuki approving of anything sneaky.” Hikari reflected. “He’s not a sneaky kind of guy.”

“No, he ain’t.” Shishi agreed. “That’s why he’s a good Kashira. Because everyone knows where they stand. He ain’t the type to lie or pretend if he ain’t happy about somethin’ or someone. He settles it straight an’ then it’s done with. Sneakin’ is a coward’s game — like that Miramu. It ain’t Kashira’s style an’ nor is it ours, these days.”

She stifled a yawn, glancing across the square.

“That one is the place that guy was talkin’ about.” She added. “Must be. Are we goin’ to follow his advice? Looks all right a place, from here. An’ he wasn’t kiddin’ about the stablin’...for one night, it should be okay, right?”

“It should.” Jin frowned, a thoughtful look flitting into his dark eyes. Slowly he nodded.

“All right.” He began slowly. “Don’t hit me, either of you. I don’t mean this the way it sounds.”

“Mean what?” Hikari stared at him, and Jin shot her a rueful look.

“I think it would be better... if we took one room tonight. Not two.” He hazarded. Shishi’s eyes opened wide at this.

“*Jin!*” She exclaimed. “What the hell? What’d Kashira say, if he found out you wanted to bed down with us in the same room when he’s left you in charge of this trip?”

“That’s exactly why.” Jin rubbed his chin. “I told you, don’t hit me. I don’t mean anythin’ funny by it. I won’t watch you change, an’ I’ll stand out in the hall while you do it, if you like. But listen. I am in charge of you guys. An’ even though I know you’re damn good with a sword, Shishi, an’ Hikari’s been able to use Suzaku’s magic sometimes, I still feel responsible. I don’t know this city an’ I don’t want to leave you by yourselves. Even if you can take care o’ yourselves... I won’t sleep if I ain’t sure you’re within easy reach in case o’ trouble.”

“Jin...” Hikari’s expression, which had taken on a look of alarm at his initial words, softened into a smile. “You know, we’re only here to sleep, right? Sairou is peaceful — right? We’re not out in the desert yet... and Chichiri didn’t say anything about Hengei being really dangerous... did he? I thought the point of spending the night here was to be safe and away from the mountain wolves and thieves.”

“It is.” Jin agreed. “But...”

He frowned, brushing his fingers against the hilt of his sword.

“All cities have underworlds.” He murmured. “Believe me — it ain’t a matter of whether or not a country is peaceful. Kounan has thieves an’ vagabonds, people who’ll kill you for a few coins if they’re desperate for somethin’ to eat. An’ while the East still have slavin’, you’ll get the traders still out lookin’ for an unsuspectin’ soul to drag aboard their wagon. These things are facts of life in all countries, Hikari — I’d feel safer if we didn’t split up too much tonight.”

“When you put it that way, maybe you’re right.” Shishi acknowledged. “Even Kashira’d say that keeping everyone safe an’ together is important. But you damn well better not be thinkin’ of usin’ this opportunity to take advantage, Jintsui!”

“Take advantage of what?” Jin protested, and Shishi raised an eyebrow at him. Much to Hikari’s surprise, Jin’s expression transformed from one of confusion to one of dismay, and he shook his head.

“Stop it.” He said bluntly. “Else you’ll sleep in the stables with the damn horses.”

“Yeah, that’d be convenient.” Shishi murmured, and Jin’s expression darkened.

“I’m not kidding.” He warned her. “Zip it.”

“Are there really slaves in the East?” Hikari asked hurriedly, as she sensed a squabble brewing between the two pseudo-siblings. “In Kutou — people are kept as slaves?”

“In parts.” Jin nodded. “So I’ve heard. The trade there thrived under the last Emperor, accordin’ to Chichiri. The current one’s been tryin’ to cut it out — but Kutou’s a messed up place. Even the Emperor isn’t in control of what people are doin’ — it’s nuts.”

“Kutou has always been full of war and death and making people suffer.” Shishi said categorically. “Why else would someone like that freak Nakago wind up existing, huh? I swear, we need to stop them from whatever it is they’re planning. Considering their track record, they’re twisted enough to destroy the world just for fun.”

“So we’ll stop them.” Jin said evenly. “But right now, we’re going to find a room and stable the horses.”

He grinned, his dark eyes lighting up with humour.

“We’ll save the world tomorrow, okay?” He added. “An’ study Chichiri’s map a little more. Maybe someone’ll be able to tell us the best path out of here, in the mornin’. Byakko is a big deal in the West. Surely someone in Sairou will know where we can find the Seishi known as Toroki?”

It had indeed been a day’s ride to Eiroku.

As Aoiketsu dismounted his steed, he let out a sigh of relief, fumbling at his waist for the gourd that held the precious drinking water he had found invaluable during the long and monotonous trek across the desert lands. All around him, his comrades were acting in similar ways, each one of them dusty and tired from the arduous journey.

“First snow, now sand.” Maichu remarked, as he handed his horse’s reins to the groom of the stables. “You know, the East has its problems, but it makes me really glad that I was born there, coming to places like this.”

“It is grim.” Aoiketsu acknowledged. “I was starting to think we’d never get here. And with us travelling by day... through desert land...”

“To save time.” Maichu grimaced. “Just because that Suiko woman can manipulate water, and was able to keep us supplied through underground streams and lakes during the trek, it doesn’t make it any easier to cross the land under the glare of the sun. I’m liking Sairou just as much as I liked Hokkan so far. And this is only the West! God only knows how hot it must be in the South.”

“No doubt we’ll find that out too, soon enough.” Aoiketsu said wryly, and Maichu nodded.

“No kidding.” He agreed. “Oh well. At least it proves the old adage that there really is no place like home. Civil war there may be, but still...”

“Mmm.” Aoiketsu nodded. “But we’re here now. That’s something, at least.”

As they rejoined their companions on the main street, Aoiketsu cast their enigmatic commander a glance, noting that, despite his usual impassive composure, the heat and strain of the ride had affected him also. A short distance away, shrouded in a wispy black cloak so as not to excite suspicion, Suiko was clearly in some kind of petulant sulk, and Aoiketsu reflected that since they had left Kutou’s port, the unpredictable mage had become more and more childish.

“Is she really any use to us?” He wondered. “If all she does is whine and moan and stamp her feet? True, she could tell us where water sources were on our journey, but it wasn’t like she did much to help us reach it if Hyoushin-sama didn’t order her to directly. She’s turning into a royal pain — I guess I can see why they shut her in that cave.”

He glanced around him, looking for the other unpopular member of the party, and his brows knitted together as he observed Miramu’s apparent nonchalance, unaffected by the heat or the dry land despite the fact the sun was still high in the sky even at this late hour. As if sensing the attention on him, the man lifted his head, meeting Aoiketsu’s gaze with an amused, taunting one of his own, and Aoiketsu bristled, turning his head away.

“Another liability.” He decided. “Yeesh, Kintsusei-sama, what have you sent us to Sairou with, anyway?”

“We’ve made good time, in the end.” Hyoushin was speaking now, and Aoiketsu turned his attention back to his commander as he fought

to focus his tired brain on the man's words. "We'll spend the night in Eiroku, and progress to the next town on the morrow. I had hoped to travel further by cover of darkness, but I can see that some of you are at the end of your tether already. It is a nuisance, but I have no intention of leaving anyone behind — so I imagine we will have to take another long day in the sun tomorrow."

"Great." Maichu grimaced. "Hyoushin-sama, is all of Sairou desert?"

"More or less." It was Miramu who answered this question, folding his arms lazily across his chest. "It's not like your Eastern land, soldier. There is little water and the towns have sprung up where there are sources. Does it depress you, seeing dust and emptiness for so many hours together?"

"Damn right it does." Maichu reflected. "No wonder you quit this place and came to Kutou."

Miramu laughed, inclining his head slightly.

"Yes. Although there were a few other reasons why I left Sairou than just the desire to be near plentiful supplies of water." He said evenly. "I'm not popular in these parts."

"You're an assassin. Doesn't that go with the territory?" Aoiketsu asked, and Miramu shrugged.

"Probably it does." He agreed, unconcerned. "I must say, it is nostalgic. Coming back to Eiroku after all these years. This is my home ground, you know."

He flung out a hand towards the south-west, offering a grin.

"My home village is just beyond that rise, about an hour and a half by horse. Or less, if you know the best paths." He added. "Although that place holds no interest to us on this trip. We're heading north-east instead, towards the Kanin mountains you can just see across the horizon. That is where you will find Byakko's treasure — so it won't be quite a complete homecoming."

He let out a humourless, strange chuckle.

"I imagine that the people of my village won't be sorry to have missed me." He added. "As I said, I'm not overly popular."

"Then you keep your head down too, Miramu." Hyoushin said quietly. "And tell us what you know about Eiroku. If this is local territory, you can once more advise us on where the best place is to stay."

“In this town? Anywhere’s as good as anywhere else.” Miramu said wryly. “Eiroku was once a thriving trading town, but since the crystal mines became exhausted, it lost some of its prominence. These days most of the families here scrape a living on what trade they can manage from the desert sands. Few people come here seeking shelter... and even fewer leave here without being accosted by beggars or bandits of some nature. Such is the sad fate of this town.”

“Great. So we’ve stopped in the middle of criminal country?” Kayu demanded. Miramu shrugged.

“That depends on who you are.” He reflected. “The people of Eiroku are very suspicious of outsiders as a rule. They are a closeknit community — there’s no infighting or backstabbing among their own people. But if they discover you’re from the East, they will probably see you as fair game. Particularly if they see her.”

He gestured at Suiko, who glared at him in return.

“She’s obviously not from Sairou. I have no doubt that they’d be afraid of her. And yourself as well, Hyoushin. I imagine they see few Meihi in these parts.”

“There are few Meihi in any parts these days.” Hyoushin said evenly. “So that is not unusual. I am quite unconcerned by people who stare at me. We have little choice but to brave the potential hostility of the townsfolk and try and beg shelter... even in a town such as you describe, it is better than heading into the desert right away.”

“If that’s what you want.” Miramu nodded. “Follow me.”

“If Sairou is such a peaceful country, why is Eiroku such a messed up city?” Aoiketsu wondered, as they followed the lithe assassin through the oddly empty streets. “And shit, where is everyone? It’s like a ghost town.”

“Watching us, probably.” Miramu said carelessly. “I told you. They get twitchy about strangers.”

He spread his hands.

“As for your other question, Aoi-kun, do you really have such naive faith in the Beast God to provide peace and security for everyone? Don’t be foolish. Sairou is at peace, yes. There is no war here, and no killing. But there are still poor people. There are still limited resources. Such things are facts of life in parts of Sairou. In peace and in war, that is just how things are. You are a fool indeed if you believe Byakko no Miko and her Celestial slaves had any power over those matters.”

“Miramu is probably right.” Hyoushin reflected. “Even if we achieve the Emperor’s errand and there is a way to raise Seiryuu, it will still be up to the people of Kutou to help put their wounded country back together, in the end. Divine magic is all very well, but if the will to change is not in the hearts of the people, then it will not succeed.”

“Hyoushin-sama.” Aoiketsu shot his commander a startled look, and Hyoushin nodded.

“I am a realist.” He observed. “Such is my belief. Kutou must also help itself, if Seiryuu’s power is to be used to its utmost effectiveness.”

“Well, and I never thought you and I would agree on anything, Hyoushin.” Miramu laughed. “But I see we both have doubts over the strength of divine monsters to protect the ways of man.”

“Don’t say things about Seiryuu-kami-sama.” Suiko snapped, glaring at him. “He’s not a monster, he’s a dragon. And he’d wipe you out in a second... don’t underestimate what he can do!”

“So you do remember how to speak, then.” Miramu laughed. “You’ve been sulking so long I almost thought we’d left you behind, Suiko.”

“I hate this dry, dusty place.” Suiko pouted. “And I hate you, so I don’t want to talk to you.”

“Stop it, both of you.” Hyoushin sighed, flicking his fingers towards the path ahead. “It seems we’ve attracted some company, and it’s better we do not give them the impression of hostility.”

“Er... Commander... they already look kinda hostile.” Maichu’s fingers were already inching towards his blade, and as Aoiketsu assessed the demeanour of the group that blocked their way he swallowed hard, half-ready to follow his friend’s example.

“Noone is to draw their weapons.” Hyoushin said softly, as if somehow he had seen their actions without even looking around. “This mission is peaceful. No blood will be spilled. We will not alienate the people of Eiroku if we can avoid it.”

“They don’t seem convinced. And we’re out-numbered.” Kayu swallowed hard. “Hyoushin-sama, do you think you could tell *them* that we’re not spilling blood?”

“Geiyo Miramu!”

Before Hyoushin could respond, a man stood forward, sword clasped in his hand as he did so.

“You have some nerve to return to this town! Or have you finally come to face your justice?”

“Hoku-san.” Miramu seemed unconcerned by the sudden singling out, or the vehemence with which the townsman had spoken his name. He bowed his head almost mockingly, holding out his hands. “And it has been a long time, hasn’t it? Ten years, or very nearly that? I’m impressed that you recognise me, considering the length of time.”

“I would never forget you, Geiyo Miramu.” The man’s voice shook with anger, and for a moment Aoiketsu had the impression that the stranger would dart forward and attempt to impale the assassin on his weapon there and then. Somehow he controlled himself, but there was pure hatred in his eyes, and Miramu chuckled, shaking his head.

“I should be honoured.” He murmured. “This is more than the homecoming I imagined, Hoku-san. To what do I owe the pleasure of your company? You... and half of the town?”

“Do not play games with me.” Hoku’s eyes narrowed to slits, his words little more than a hiss. “You and your companions all, if they choose to shelter you — you will face justice for your crimes. We have not forgotten... ten years may be a long time for you, but we have waited for the day you were foolish enough to return to Sairou.”

“Foolish indeed.” Miramu sighed, as if the whole thing was simply a matter of inconvenience. “Believe me, I would not have chosen to come here. However, money speaks... and we all have to live, don’t we?”

“Not a rogue like you. Not if we have our way!” Hoku snapped. “Submit to us and your companions will be let free. You know the penalty for coming here and staring at me with those cold, cursed eyes.”

“I am not afraid of you.” Miramu’s fingers moved swiftly towards his quiver. “Or killing any of you. You should know that... considering why you want me so badly.”

“Wait.” Hyoushin put up his hands, glancing from Miramu to the angry townspeople. “An explanation, if you please.”

“You are a foreigner to this land. It does not concern you.” Hoku said darkly, and Hyoushin’s eyes narrowed.

“On the contrary, Geiyo Miramu is in my protection, on the orders of my Emperor.” He said softly. “And I do not seek conflict of any kind. Therefore there must be a solution to your concerns. Tell me. What is it you seek Miramu for?”

Hoku's eyes narrowed, and Miramu let out another amused chuckle, although this time Aoiketsu saw the same uncertain, dark flicker of something in the assassin's unusual eyes.

"He is a demon who must be suppressed." Hoku said at length. "He and any who seek to protect him. He is evil, stranger. You cannot be oblivious to that fact."

"I did not claim to be his friend. Only that I am ordered to ensure his safe conduct through Sairou." Hyoushin said coolly. "And I ask you again — what matter is it of such urgency that makes you demand him and threaten his life?"

"Ten years ago he killed a man in this town." Hoku said quietly, sending Miramu an accusatory look. "A man who was my brother."

"I see." Hyoushin's eyes narrowed, and he cast Miramu a sidelong glance.

"This is true?"

"I don't deny it." Miramu shrugged his shoulders. "And I'm not sorry for it, either. If he were here in front of me, I would do it over again. I almost feel it's a pity that I'm not able to, if you want to know the truth, Hoku. I have plenty of reasons to slay him more than once, after all."

"You see! He is a demon!" Hoku exclaimed, and Miramu snorted.

"That would be logical, since I was sired by one born in hell." He snapped, and Aoiketsu's eyes opened wide as he registered the sudden change in Miramu's demeanour. From relaxed and taunting, there was the hint of genuine anger in his indigo eyes, and the assassin suddenly had the look of the predator about him. "I have no regrets for your brother, Hoku. He was evil incarnate. If I am too, so be it. He was, after all, the man who was my father. For that alone, his death was a justifiable punishment. I never asked for life, or for him to play the part he did in my conception. He has paid the price for his crime... and I do not regret it."

"Miramu!" Hoku raised his weapon, clearly incensed, and Hyoushin sighed, drawing his own blade and moving to stand between them.

"I am not here to spill blood." He said softly. "Nor do I wish to take sides in something which is none of my concern. I am an emissary of the Emperor of Kutou, and as such, I must obey the orders given me. I am instructed to protect Geiyo Miramu from harm, though it gives me little pleasure to do so. And I will not condone his attack on your or your people, either. Clearly you have suffered at his hand — for which

I offer my apologies. It is not my intention to condone his action or undermine your resentment. But I must ask you to lower your weapons and allow him safe conduct. He is needed by my King, and for that reason, I must be willing to fight to defend him. No matter what his nature.”

At Hyoushin’s words, Hoku faltered for a moment, eying the Meihai doubtfully.

“You would protect a demon such as this from justice?” He asked quietly. “And yet you say you seek to *avoid* bloodshed? Do you not understand the suffering this man has caused, man of Kutou?”

“I cannot imagine that it would be possible for me to understand that.” Hyoushin said levelly. “And nor will I insult you or your brother’s memory by claiming that I do. No, Hoku-san. I am not able to comprehend what you have lost, or your anger for this man. But my mission here may be to the benefit of hundreds and thousands of innocent lives in Kutou. In doing this, Miramu is surely earning his penance for the lives he has stolen. And as I said, I have my orders. I will not fight you, if I do not have to. I seek nothing more than a peaceful settlement. But Geiyo Miramu must remain alive. He is needed.”

Miramu laughed at this, his usual composure restored by Hyoushin’s words.

“You do amuse me, Hyoushin.” He reflected. “You hate me, yet you defend me, because it is Kintsusei-sama’s word.”

“I have honour enough to obey my Emperor’s instruction.” Hyoushin replied without even looking around. “Otherwise, Miramu, it would give me much pleasure to hand you over to these people who seem to have a justifiable reason to want you dead.”

“As justifiable a reason, I imagine, as I had for wanting to kill my father.” Miramu said evenly. “As I said, if I am evil, it is inherited.”

“Such tales are lies!”

“They are not lies.” Miramu’s eyes narrowed. “I did not slay my father because I cared about you or your feelings, Ojisan. I did it because a monster such as he deserved death. For my sake, for my mother’s sake — and for being the instrument of so much suffering — I executed the man who was the cause of everything. I have never concealed the crime, nor lied about my having taken pleasure from it. I would take little pleasure from slaying *you*, Hoku. But I will not repent the death of my father. And if you attack me, I will defend

myself. With all the attributes that made me such a fearsome opponent for your brother, even as a boy of fourteen.”

Something sinister flared in the indigo eyes once more, and Aoiketsu bit his lip, wondering how Hyoushin was going to manage to diffuse the escalating situation.

For a moment there was silence, then Hyoushin sighed.

“Hoku-san, what is the most precious thing to you? The thing which, aside from vengeance, you desire most in this world?” He asked quietly.

Hoku stared at him, nonplussed, and Hyoushin gestured around him at the desolate, run-down streets.

“Eiroku has fallen on rough times, correct?”

“Yes.” Hoku admitted. “However...”

“The crystal trade has moved on, and your town has not the resources to pick itself up and move on with it?”

“I don’t see how...”

“So tell me, Hoku-san. What would make Eiroku’s condition improve?” Hyoushin asked softly. “Stuck here, at the edge of the desert. What would be to Eiroku’s benefit?”

“Do you seek to make some bribe or trade for the life of that wretch?” Hoku demanded. Hyoushin inclined his head.

“As you say.” He agreed. “As I must.”

“There is only one thing which could bring Eiroku back to life.” Hoku said bitterly. “And even your Emperor could not grant that, man of the East. I appreciate your attempts, however...”

He trailed off, and Hyoushin’s eyes flickered with understanding.

“Water.” He murmured. “Am I correct, Hoku-san? Your town struggles because it lacks water?”

“Water is precious all across the West.” Hoku agreed. “But you are not able to provide miracles. And in the absence of such things, we will not be denied our justice. After ten years, we will avenge the death of my brother once and for all.”

Hyoushin’s brows knitted together, then he turned back towards his companions.

“Suiko.” He said firmly, and the mage’s head jerked up as she

stared at him in confusion.

“Hyoushin?”

“You heard Hoku-san’s words.” Hyoushin said evenly. “The town needs water. Water is the only thing that they will consider in trade for Miramu’s life.”

“I don’t care.” Suiko said petulantly. “I don’t like Miramu. He should die.”

Hyoushin’s brow twitched in irritation.

“That was not a request.” He said flatly. “It was an order.”

“An order from the Emperor, perhaps?” Suiko asked him coquettishly, and Hyoushin nodded.

“You can consider it so.” He said evenly.

Suiko sighed, reaching up to push back the hood of her cape as she surveyed the scene with distaste, and several of Hoku’s followers gasped as they absorbed her unusual appearance.

“I don’t see the need to preserve Byakko’s rubbish.” She said frankly, shooting Miramu a poisonous look as she did so. “But if it’s an order from the Emperor, I must act on it. Hyoushin, you’re mean.”

“Yes, I am.” Hyoushin was unmoved. “Stop complaining and do as you are bidden.”

“Wait... what is she? What are you going to do?” Hoku was apprehensive, and Hyoushin offered him a slight smile.

“Suiko is Seiryuu’s mage, and Guardian of Kutou.” He said quietly. “She has the power to manipulate water, as given her by the divine Seiryuu himself. She will provide your town with water, if you allow us to pass through unmolested, and do not continue to seek the death of Geiyo Miramu.”

“Is... is... is that true?” Hoku’s eyes widened, and Hyoushin nodded.

“If those terms are acceptable to you.” He agreed. “I will not pretend that I can buy your cooperation or make you forget your grief at losing your brother, Hoku-san. But this might serve as an adequate memorial — that Eiroku may once more be able to flourish as it once did.”

He gestured to Suiko, who sighed, rolling her eyes.

“Such a waste of time and effort.” She muttered. “Giving water to

this dusty, dirty little town who have no appreciation for Seiryuu-kami-sama. I am not Byakko's servant, Hyoushin. Must I really taint myself by helping these heathen people?"

"If you don't want to be returned to your cave rather more swiftly than planned, yes." Hyoushin said bluntly, and Suiko fixed him with a hurt look.

"You're so cold." She reproached him. "Just like these people. You don't understand anything about Seiryuu-sama either, and..."

"Do as you are told, or I will send a message to Kutou forthwith and inform the Emperor of your disobedience." Hyoushin cut across her. "He has the Shinzahou and he has Seiryuu's scale. I have no doubt that, considering those things, he could have Lord Kikei seal you back where you came from even at this remote distance. Do not try my patience, Suiko. Do as you are bidden — bring water forth for the town of Eiroku."

"Fine." Suiko grimaced, but she clapped her hands together, closing her eyes as her body shimmered with azure light. For a moment nothing happened, then there was a creak and a shudder as the trackway heaved apart, a crack zigzagging its way across the land. Aoiketsu was sure that, even from where he and Maichu were standing, he could hear the bubbling rush of water surging to the surface, and as the first drops broke through the dry land, Suiko spread her hands, guiding the sudden flow into the town's dry well.

"Your wretched town has water." She told the startled Hoku frankly. "Though I don't care if you kill that man... it doesn't bother me."

"You... are truly a witch?" One of Hoku's companions found his voice, and Suiko's brows twitched in irritation.

"I am a mage. Speak with some respect." She snapped. "Hyoushin, I've done what you said. I've diverted the underground source so that it will plenish the well indefinitely. Will you stop being mean to me now? I've given them water."

"Will it suffice, Hoku-san, that we exchange this water for the life of Geiyo Miramu?" Hyoushin asked softly. "Undeserving as he may be, Kutou has grave need of him. And people in my land suffer worse than even you and your kind do."

Hoku was silent for a moment. Then he met Hyoushin's gaze.

"You are a man of honour." He said quietly. "Even though you bring an enemy to our town, you are cognisant of our discomfort and

you seek to help without causing us harm. You are correct — the water your friend has summoned will indeed help sustain the lives of many people in Eiroku — and, perhaps, help to revive our failing prospects, also.”

He cast Miramu a look of distaste.

“You will doubtless face your demons soon enough.” He added. “My friends and I will not take your life. *This* time. This water is a fitting memorial to my brother — but I do not wish to see you in Eiroku again. You are not welcome here. You are never welcome here. Is this understood, Geiyo Miramu?”

“I face my demons every day I wake up, Ojisan.” Miramu said evenly. “I have no desire to hang around your town, either. As I said, it was not my choice to come. And I will not be coming back.”

“I suppose this means we’re moving on again tonight.” Aoiketsu murmured, and Maichu grimaced, nodding his head.

“I can’t imagine we’ll be staying here, considering.” He agreed. “Dammit. I’m so tired, too.”

“Maybe we’ll head for Miramu’s village.” Aoiketsu wondered, and Maichu snorted.

“Do you think that his family will welcome home a father-killer?” He demanded. “Not a chance. No. Hyoushin-sama will make sure we steer well clear of anywhere where Miramu’s past might be a problem. He is a sly bastard though, isn’t he? I can’t make out what he’s thinking. I mean, we all train to kill in combat — but he seems to do it for fun. What kind of guy takes pleasure in killing his own father?”

“One who was scarred by him irrevocably, I imagine.” Aoiketsu frowned, remembering the conversation aboard the boat, and Maichu sent his friend a surprised look.

“Are you saying you feel sorry for him? That you’re on Miramu’s side?”

“No.” Aoiketsu shook his head. “I don’t like him or trust him. But I think he’s twisted. Maybe crazy. He says some of the strangest things — about life and death and God knows what. Something must’ve made him that messed up.”

He sighed, glancing at his hands.

“He told me on board the boat that he killed his father and that he didn’t regret it.” He added. “I wasn’t sure if it was bravado or if it wasn’t. Guess it wasn’t.”

“Why the hell did he tell you that?”

“Not sure.” Aoiketsu admitted. “He got all funny about my eyes, too.”

“Your eyes?” Maichu stared. “You don’t mean he was hitting on you? Aoi...”

“No, you moron!” Aoiketsu cuffed his friend impatiently. “Not that. Don’t be stupid. I meant he just commented on the colour. Like it was unusual for someone from Kutou to have blue eyes.”

“It is unusual.” Maichu reminded him, and Aoiketsu frowned.

“Not that unusual.” He murmured. “Not if you come from the western borderlands.”

“But you don’t.” Maichu said bluntly. “The Kaiga family come from central Kutou and have done for generations.”

He narrowed his eyes.

“So you *are* still thinking about this father thing.” He realised. “And whether or not you are who everyone’s always said you are. Aoi, let it go, huh? It’s not important. And so what if your eyes are blue? Blue is Seiryuu’s colour, isn’t it? You should be proud.”

“Seiryuu’s colour.” Aoiketsu bit his lip. “Yes. I suppose you’re right.”

“Suiko looks like she might throw another wobbly.” Maichu reflected, and Aoiketsu grimaced.

“She’s a pain.” He said categorically. “And she’s all over Hyoushin-sama... I’m amazed he hasn’t swatted her away like a fly.”

“I guess you can’t do that to Seiryuu’s mage.” Maichu laughed. “Even the Commander realises that, although he’s damn short with her. And she seems to take it, too. Did you notice that? When Hyoushin-sama calls her a witch, she doesn’t flinch. But if anyone else does... do you think guardian spirits can have crushes?”

“I think you’ve had too much desert sun.” Aoiketsu said frankly. “Come on, Maichu. We’re moving out, by the looks. Guess we’ll be hiring fresh horses and making that overnight trek after all — even if we fall asleep in the saddle!”

Chapter 6

Chapter Five

“I guess that guy wasn’t kidding about his friend’s accomodation.”

As the three teenagers stirred from the Hengei inn, Shishi stifled a yawn, stretching her hands over his head as she cast a glance up and down the main street. It was early the next morning and all around them, people were beginning to emerge for the day’s trading. From long experience in the southern mountains, Shishi knew that before long the market would be in full swing as the local residents made the most of the cooler part of the Sairou day.

“You sound like you’re still half asleep.” Jin observed, and Shishi cast him a rueful glance, shaking her head.

“No.” She replied. “I’m awake, I promise. We’ve just had a heavy day’s travel yesterday. And it’s going to be hot again today, isn’t it?”

“It’s hot in Kounan. Hotter than this.” Jin gazed up at the sky with a smile. “You’re getting wussy in your old age, Shishi — what happened to the girl who was born under the Lion’s sign in summer, huh?”

“Oh, I’m not bothered by the heat.” Shishi grimaced. “But it’s so damn dry and dusty. It makes you thirsty and tired.”

“I don’t like the heat *or* the dust.” Hikari admitted with a sigh. “You did remember what you said yesterday, Jin? No more horses... right?”

“Yeah, no more horses.” Jin sent her an amiable grin. “We’ll walk the next stage. But before we do, I want to make sure the Kashira’s beasts are safe here till either we come back this way, or someone can get word to the mountain to pick ‘em up. I ought to speak to the guy before we go... an’ I want to double check the trackways outta here, too. If we’re travellin’ most of the day, we want to be nearish any sources of water.”

“You really do sound grown up and sensible when you say things like that.” Shishi sighed, shaking her head. “It’s worryin’, Jin. You know that?”

“Hey, you shut your yap, cheeky.” Jin cuffed her playfully. “I’m bein’ responsible, that’s all. An’ besides, I got Suzaku treasure with me, don’t I? I ain’t gonna face the Kashira if anythin’ goes wrong.”

“Suzaku treasure?” Shishi snorted. “Hiki?”

“Both of you.” Jin said frankly. “You’re Kashira’s cub, remember. You’re damn lucky to have a Ma an’ a Pa like Kashira an’ Anzu-sama — an’ I ain’t gonna repay their kindness to me over the years by seein’ you get yourself killed.”

“All right, all right. I get it.” Shishi pulled a face. “Lighten up, will you? Does it seem dangerous to you?”

“No.” Jin admitted. “But I like to be prepared.”

“You two are still squabbling.” Hikari observed with a frown. “Are you sure you didn’t have a fight over something? You’re both being kind of weird, if you want to know the truth.”

“Jin’s just getting way too big for his mountain boots. That’s all.” Shishi folded her arms, sending the older bandit a meaningful look. “Go check up on the horses, you ape. Hiki an’ I will wait for you here. It’s shady an’ we might pick up some fruit or somethin’ from the market before we trek out.”

“I don’t know if I should leave you on your own.” Jin said doubtfully, and Shishi snorted.

“Don’t insult me.” She said frankly. “I’m almost as good as you with a sword, an’ Hiki can glow red an’ scare the shit outta people. Besides, she’s got the Emperor’s sword, so we’ll be fine. An’ like I said, there ain’t any danger. Go speak to the damn innkeeper, before it gets too late in the mornin’ an’ we’re makin’ the most of our journey when the sun’s climbin’ highest!”

At his friend’s blunt words, Jin offered a rueful smile, holding up his hands in surrender.

“All right. Fine. Whatever you say.” He conceded. “I won’t be long. Just stick around here and I’ll see you in a minute.”

“Right.” Hikari nodded. “Jin, don’t worry. Shishi’s right — what’s going to happen while you just go to speak to the owner of the inn?”

Jin sent her a sheepish smile, shrugging his shoulders.

“Nothing, I guess.” He admitted. “I get it. I’m on overkill where the worryin’ is concerned.”

“Just go do it already.” Shishi told him unsympathetically. “Geez.”

“He does seem to be taking the whole thing really seriously.”

Once the two girls were alone, Hikari cast her friend a pensive look.

“Don’t you think so? When we went north, he wasn’t as bothered by things as this.”

“But when we went North, Kashira an’ Chichiri were here.” Shishi said evenly. “He’s over the top, no kidding. But truth is, I s’pose, it’s first time Kashira’s given him a task like this. An’ he feels it, somewhat. He looks up to Kashira as much as any of us, to be honest. Well, that’s why Papa is who he is. Because he’s that kind of leader.”

“I guess your family is kind of like Jin’s family, isn’t it?” Hikari looked wistful, and Shishi shot her a sharp look, nodding her head.

“Yeah.” She agreed. “Hiki, are you gonna get weepy an’ homesick on me? Because if you are...”

“No. No, I’m all right.” Hikari shook her head. “Really, I’m fine.”

“If you say so.” Shishi pursed her lips. “An’ hey, you know, while you’re with us, we’re your family too, right? Suzaku’s family, an’ all that. Didn’t Chichiri an’ Aidou-obasama say you were an honorary member of the Ri family already?”

“Yes, they did...”

“So that makes us family, unofficially.” Shishi grinned, reaching out to grab Hikari by the hand and squeezing her fingers reassuringly. “An’ Jin an’ me are good as brother an’ sister most days. So... don’t you dare feel abandoned or homesick, okay? We’re takin’ care of you, so you ain’t got a reason to moan.”

Despite herself, Hikari smiled at this, and Shishi was relieved to see it.

“You’re right.” The schoolgirl said now. “I’m sorry. Just it gets me from time to time. But you’re right. I’m not on my own. And I’m focused. Really. We’re going to find Toroki and we’re going to talk her into helping us.”

“Can you sense where the Shinzahou is?” Shishi questioned, and Hikari frowned.

“No.” She admitted. “But I guess we’re just not close enough to it. I didn’t deliberately try and find the Seiryuu one — it seemed to call out to me more than I did to it. This time is different because I know I might be able to do that kind of thing. But it’s okay. We’ll find someone who knows something about it... I’m sure of that.”

“Me too.” Shishi nodded. “An’ the sooner we’re off, the better it’ll be. After all, even if Kutou are coming for this one, they’ve still got a hell of a journey to do. And they can’t know any more than we do

about where it is — right? They're not from Sairou any more than we are."

"Right." Hikari agreed. "With any luck, we'll get in there and convince Toroki before they even reach Sairou land."

"Hey, girls — it's early for you to be up and around on your own, isn't it?"

A voice interrupted their conversation at that moment, and Shishi instinctively tensed, her fingers twitching towards her sword as she turned to face the speaker. He was maybe three or four years older than Jin, and lean in his build, but Shishi could tell at a glance that he was far from a weakling, and from the swagger in his demeanour, he meant them no good. She narrowed her eyes, slipping in front of Hikari as her friend sent her a startled, uncertain look.

"It's early for your kind to be trawlin' streets, too." She said frankly. "Get lost — we don't have time to talk to you."

"The kid's got a lip on her." A second voice observed, a soft Western roll to his accent, and Shishi cursed, realising that where there had been one man there were now three, and each one was armed with a rough knife or blade.

"Hiki, get back in the inn." She said firmly. "Go find Jin, an' tell him some lowlifes think they can mess about the Kashira's bandits."

"Shishi..." Hikari eyed her friend hesitantly, and Shishi drew her weapon, sending the schoolgirl a glare.

"You heard me. Do it." She snapped. "Now. I'm fine — don't worry, I don't intend on fightin' anyone I don't have to."

"Hey, you're not going to leave on us, are you?" Before Hikari could react, one of the men had lurched forward, grabbing her by the arm, and Shishi swore again, brandishing her weapon as she dove in the man's direction.

"Let her go!" She exclaimed, even as Hikari struggled in the stranger's grasp. "I mean it — you don't want to be messing with us!"

"What're two girls gonna do to us?" The ringleader snorted, and Shishi could tell that, despite the early hour, the men had probably been drinking most of the night. "You're just kids — though if you play nice, we'll teach you somethin' about bein' all adult. How's that sound?"

"Like you need someone to teach you a lesson in manners." Shishi spat back, even as Hikari managed to shift herself slightly in her

captor's grip, sinking her teeth into his arm. He let out a yell, loosening his grasp, and she wriggled free, hurrying to Shishi's side as the redhead inched back towards the inn, still brandishing her weapon as a warning.

"I ain't a rookie with this thing." She said flatly. "If you don't want to be hurt, stay where you are."

"You think you're a pro, huh?" The ringleader drew his own weapon, lunging towards her with his blade outstretched and Shishi reacted quickly, pushing Hikari back against the inn wall as she parried his shot, gritting her teeth against his strength. His skill was rough and clumsy, but he had strength in his sword arm and she knew that he could potentially hurt her, if she wasn't completely on her guard.

"I know what I'm doing." She said darkly. "An' I ain't afraid of some drunken lout who ain't got the technique to fight a proper, open battle."

The man chuckled at this, annoying the young bandit further and she narrowed her eyes, bringing her sword down hard against the bandit's rough-edged blade with a clang as she sought to use her speed and agility to push him back. At first taken off guard, the man backed off some, but before she could press her advantage, something came flying through the air towards her, slamming against her right arm. A sudden flash of pain, followed by the sensation of wetness struck Shishi's senses and her blade clattered to the ground as she cursed, aware of Hikari's exclamation in the background.

"We don't like girls with lip." The man who had thrown his knife bent to retrieve it, taking Shishi's sword at the same time. "You should have done as you were told. Now you're gonna get all cut up — you and your friend."

"It's a pity. She has such a pretty face." The leader advanced on Shishi once more, and the young redhead bit her lip, fighting the stinging pain in her arm as she struggled to evade his grip. He grabbed her by the arms, pinning her back against the wall as he pushed his weapon to her throat, and Shishi struggled against him like a wildcat, drawing blood from his skin with her nails as she fought to regain her freedom. He cursed, but did not release his grip, instead pushing his body towards hers as he pressed his full weight against her ribs, causing her to gasp as she felt her breathing suddenly restricted.

"Not so lippy now." The leader breathed alcohol fumes towards her, making her feel nauseous, and she grimaced at him, spitting in his

face as he swore again, slapping her hard across the cheek.

“No manners, you little brat.” He hissed. “You’re goin’ to learn a serious lesson, believe me.”

“Let her go!” Hikari’s voice broke through the commotion, followed by a sudden loosening of the man’s suffocating hold on the young bandit, and Shishi slid to the ground with a bump, her vision swirling as she struggled to get to her feet. As she did so, she caught sight of her friend, Hotohori’s blade clutched in her hands. Although her expression was a mixture of fear and resolution, her grip did not falter, and Shishi’s eyes widened as she realised the blade was glittering and glowing with red light from hilt to tip.

The man who had minutes earlier held Shishi captive now turned his attention to Hikari, and Shishi registered the tear to the fabric of his clothing, realising with a jolt that Hikari had already made contact with the man’s skin. Beneath the tear, the flesh was red as if the touch had burnt him, and Shishi swallowed the bile that rose in her throat, staring with a mixture of disbelief and amazement at the strange, glimmering blade her friend clutched in her hands.

“Leave us alone, or I’ll hurt you with this.” Hikari’s voice trembled, but she did not break her stand, meeting the rogues’ gazes as she wielded her weapon in front of her. “It’s a cursed sword. Anyone it touches is damned. Don’t you see the devil’s magic dancing in the blade?”

“Hiki.” Shishi murmured, her eyes huge as she registered the conviction on the schoolgirl’s face.

“Well?” Hikari swept the blade through the air, and much to Shishi’s amazement, the gathered drunks took a step back. “Do you want to anger the demon that lives in this sword? He doesn’t like jerks who pick on girls and he’ll eat the lot of you, if you touch us again.”

“The blade... burnt my skin.” The leader said unsteadily. “It really does... have a curse...”

“They ain’t so much to look at anyway, boss — let’s cut outta here.” One of his associates suggested hastily. “Let’s leave the brats alone... we can find better pickings.”

“Right.” The leader agreed, and as the three men beat a hasty retreat, Hikari bit her lip, glancing at the weapon in her hands as she slowly lowered it.

“Thank you, Hotohori-sama.” She murmured. “I’m sorry I called you a demon. I don’t really think you — or Suzaku — are. But... I had

to do something, and I don't know how to fight with a sword."

She slipped it back into its scabbard with some difficulty, hurrying down by Shishi's side as her friend struggled to gather her scattered composure.

"Are you okay?" She asked softly, and Shishi swallowed hard, nodding her head as she allowed Hikari to help her to her feet.

"Yeah, thanks to you and your demon." She said, a faint smile touching her lips. "I owe you one. I guess your protective instinct spreads to bandits too, huh?"

"No." Hikari flushed, shaking her head. "I was scared as hell. And Suzaku didn't do this. I didn't feel him stir inside me. But I didn't want them to hurt you, and I... I had the sword. So I didn't know what else to do. I didn't want them to kill you... and I thought they would."

"I did too." Shishi glanced at her bloody arm with a wince. "Ouch. That stings. Flesh wound though, I think. I'm bruised, but I don't think it's anything serious."

"Let me see." Hikari suggested, and Shishi nodded, pulling back her stained sleeve to reveal the deep slice the knife had left across her skin. Hikari frowned.

"Looks deep to me." She murmured. "There must be something we can use to put on it and to wrap it up, in the stuff that Chichiri gave us to bring with us. Hold still, all right? I'll have a look."

"Sure." Shishi nodded, leaning back against the wall as she fought a wave of dizziness. "Yeesh. I didn't expect to have trouble this early in the morning. Those jerks had been drinking all night, I bet. Worse than anyone on the mountain — they couldn't even handle their drink enough to act like human beings."

"Well, they were superstitious enough to be afraid of Hotohori-sama's *shinken*." Hikari reflected, as she carefully wiped the wound clean, fumbling in the backpack with her free hand for the length of white fabric bandages. "Stop flinching! I know it stings, but we have to do something."

"Give it me. I'll do it." Shishi held out her hand, and Hikari shrugged, doing as she was bidden.

"If you like." She agreed. "You're sure you're not hurt otherwise? You were slammed against that wall pretty hard."

"Bruises. Nothing broken." Shishi shook her head. "I'm fine. Thanks to you and the late Emperor's toy, that is."

She sent her friend a sidelong glance.

“Though if you’d gone got Jin...”

“You might’ve been killed.” Hikari finished frankly. “You’re damn good with a sword, Shishi. But you can’t fight three men like that on your own.”

She bent, scooping up Shishi’s sword and handing it to her.

“Here. They dropped this when they ran off.” She said. “You probably shouldn’t leave it behind.”

“Yeah.” Shishi agreed, taking the weapon and sliding it into her belt. “Guess not. Although what use I’m gonna be wielding it till this quits seeping blood I don’t know. Unless I want to splatter the opposition, of course.”

“Ew. That’s gross.” Hikari pulled a face. “Don’t even say things like that.”

“*Shishi?*”

Before Shishi could reply, Jin’s voice cut through the conversation and in a minute the young bandit was beside them, eying Shishi’s bloodsoaked shirt with a look of dismay.

“Shit! What did the two of you *do* while I was gone?”

“Some drunken guys went for us.” Hikari explained. “But it’s okay. We got shot of them. Only they cut Shishi’s arm... we were just making sure it was bandaged, else it’ll keep bleeding out.”

“Are you okay?” Jin cast Shishi an anxious glance, and Shishi nodded, forcing back the fleeting nausea as she tied the knot tightly in the end of the bandage.

“I am now.” She agreed. “Don’t look like that, Jin. I ain’t killed. An’ Hikari’s found a novel way to use Hotohori-sama’s sword... thanks to her they got the willies an’ ran for the hills.”

“Hotohori-sama’s...” Jin cast Hikari a quizzical look, and Hikari blushed, shrugging her shoulders.

“I might have told them a demon was living in it.” She admitted. “But it worked. I just hope Hotohori-sama forgives me for saying something like that... we don’t need to tell Reizeitei-sama about it, all right?”

“Guess not.” Jin eyed her keenly. “So long as it worked. And so long as you’re both all right. Shit. I leave you for ten seconds...”

remind me not to do that again.”

“Oh, quit fussing.” Shishi snapped. “Did you settle with the horses?”

“Yes.” Jin nodded. “Are you sure you’re up to travelling? We could stop a while longer and you could...”

“We’re going.” Shishi cut across him. “Before the sun rises too high, remember? Stop clucking. I’m fine. I told you. Jus’ a scrape which won’t bleed long now I’ve wrapped it up tight. Sure, my sword arm might be a bit compromised for a few days, but it ain’t serious. So we should move. Shinzahou’s waitin’, an’ all that.”

“If you’re sure.” Jin exchanged looks with Hikari, who shrugged.

“If Shishi says she’s all right, we have to believe her.” She said evenly. “And she’s right. We shouldn’t hang around. Those guys might’ve gone, but they could start telling everyone in Hengei that demons are after them. And we might cause a scene.”

“That’s true.” Jin frowned. “All right. Then we’ll go. The innkeeper said that if we head north-west we’ll be on good track at least until the next village. And he also said that he’d heard the legend of Byakko was connected with that place, somehow. So we’d be doing well to go in that direction. It’s not far, apparently. An’ there’s a town not much further than that which we can probably spend the night before headin’ into the mountains. I think that’s the best idea — so long as you ain’t got any divine signals tellin’ you otherwise, Hikari.”

“No. Not yet.” Hikari shook her head apologetically. “But maybe someone in the village will know what we’re looking for.”

“Then we’ll head for this village.” Shishi said decidedly. “Are you two coming? Geez.”

She set off along the street, casting a glance back over her shoulder as she saw her companions exchange looks once more, but they obediently began to follow her towards the city limits and she let out a sigh of relief, shaking her head as she picked up her pace. Her ribs ached and her head still span from the collision, but she had no desire to spend any longer in the border town, and as the desert pathway loomed ahead, she took a deep breath, steadying her composure.

“Those men weren’t kiddin’ around.” She murmured, casting one last glance behind them. “They’d have either killed or raped us — or both — if it hadn’t been for the *shinken*. Kashira’s right. No matter how damn strong I am with a sword, I’m still a girl to the outside world. An’ that means I gotta get a hell of a lot stronger before I start

branchin' out an' worryin' about bein' Kashira at Reikaku-zan myself. I guess I got a long way to go before I'm anywhere near my father's level."

The three teenagers walked in silence for some time, focusing their attention on the track that wound deeper and deeper into barren desert territory as they avoided holes and pitfalls in the road ahead. As they made their way between safe spots in the land, Shishi realised the wisdom of leaving the horses in Hengei.

"No way we'd have ridden this." She said softly, and Jin shook his head.

"We'd have wound up with a lame horse an' nothing else." He agreed. "It's hard enough goin' for us on foot."

"It's getting warmer, too." Hikari remarked, glancing up at the sun. "How much water do we have, Jin? I'm thirsty, but I'm trying to tell myself it's imagination."

"Enough for you to take a sip, if you want." Jin held out the gourd to her. "I refilled before I left the inn, and there are two more in my pack."

"Thanks." Hikari took it gratefully, taking a swig and then handing it back. "If it wasn't so dry it wouldn't be such a pain."

"At least it isn't a dust-storm." Jin said ruefully. "That'd be the last thing we need."

He glanced around him.

"It can be hot like this down south, without a doubt." He added. "But it's always green, in Kounan. It makes a difference, when it's desert."

"Yeah. So far Sairou pretty much sucks." Shishi agreed, grimacing.

"How far to the village?" Hikari wondered. "Did the man in the inn tell you how far we had to follow this trail before we reached civilisation?"

"About an hour and a half, he said." Jin remembered, glancing up towards the sky. "And where the sun is, I'd say we've been walking almost two hours. Considering that we're not familiar with the terrain an' it's damn hot, I'd say we must be quite near it. We ain't deviated from the track at all, so we can't be far away."

"Then we can stop there and take a break?" Hikari asked hopefully. Jin nodded his head.

“Guess we can.” He agreed. “We gotta ask a few questions about Toroki, anyway. If we can, without upsettin’ anyone. An’ if it’s a village, chances are there won’t be any gangs operatin’. They tend to haunt cities... we shouldn’t need to worry about attack.”

“Good.” Hikari looked relieved. “I’ve had my fill of thugs for the day.”

She cast Shishi a glance.

“You’re quiet.” She added. “Shishi, are you sure you’re all right?”

“Huh?” Shishi glanced up, frowning as she absorbed the concern on her friend’s face. She nodded.

“Yeah — why do you ask?”

“Because you’re usually a lot more rowdy an’ sparky. Hikari’s right.” Jin’s brow furrowed. “When we get to the village, Shishi, I wanna see your arm myself... okay? You look all in, an’ I want to make sure it ain’t still bleedin’.”

“It’s not.” Shishi shook her head, pulling back her sleeve to display the snow white bandage beneath. “I know how to do a damn tourniquet, Jin. I ain’t a baby. An’ I’ve taken sword cuts to the arm before. It’s no big deal... it’s just a flesh wound. He didn’t even scrape the bone. It stings, but it’ll be fine. You don’t need to worry. An’ as for being quiet, it’s hot an’ dry an’ I’m savin’ my energy. That okay with you?”

“Sure.” Jin looked surprised. “We’re just lookin’ out for you, kid.”

“I’m not a kid.” Shishi bristled at this, shaking her head. “Even if you are both older than me. I’m fine, all right? I don’t need to be fussed over. Yeesh!”

“The lion still has its claws out.” Jin pulled a face. “Fine... if that’s how you feel. Noone’s trying to baby you, Shi-chan. But if you’re all right, then you are. I still want to see the arm when we reach the village, though. You’ve not had a chance to clean the wound, and you should.”

“Whatever you say.” Shishi sighed. “If it’ll shut you up complaining.”

“I think I can see the village.” Hikari said suddenly, gesturing in the distance, and Shishi glanced up, seeing the faint outline of buildings somewhere in the heat haze.

“No kidding.” Jin grinned. “Not far, then. Good. I’m startin’ to feel

hungry... walkin' in the desert don't half give you an appetite."

"Yeah... I know what you mean." Hikari owned. "Shishi, we have enough cash with us to pay for food, right? With the fight and all we never did get to hit Hengei's market... and noone's gonna give us food for free."

"I guess." Shishi answered absently, and Hikari frowned.

"Shishi? Did you even hear my question?"

"We have money." Shishi glanced up, nodding her head. "Isn't that what you wanted to know? And the village is up ahead... just like the innkeeper said."

"Yes, but..." Hikari faltered, trailing off as Shishi stumbled, tripping over an uneven stone in the ground and tumbling to her knees.

"Shishi... can't you even look where you're going?" Jin sighed, reaching out a hand to pull her up, but Shishi pushed it away as the world swam and twisted around her.

"I don't need your help." She muttered thickly. "I just wasn't looking where I was putting my feet."

"Okay, so get up already. We're going to the village." Jin said evenly. "And the sooner we get there, the sooner we can rest and eat."

Shishi closed her eyes against the dizzy, rocking landscape, swallowing hard against the bile that rose in her throat. She rested her good hand against the ground, struggling to regain her composure and her bearings.

"Shishi?" Hikari's voice suddenly seemed very far away, and she fought to focus on it, fighting against the blackness that threatened to overwhelm her. "Jin, I don't think she's okay. She's gone pale."

"Shishi?" Now Jin was at her other side, concern in his voice, but Shishi could not find the words to answer him. Instead a wave of nausea flooded her senses, and as the wave of sickness overwhelmed her, she fought against the rising sense of panic and helplessness.

From somewhere nearby, she heard Jin curse, and then someone's arms were around her, steadying her as she found she was no longer able to support her own shuddering body. As the sickness began to subside, she let out a sigh, sinking against her companion's body.

"You weren't all right." She heard Jin say, as someone's fingers brushed her thick hair out of her face. "Look at me, Shishi. I want to see your eyes."

Shishi struggled to obey him, opening her eyes as she tried to focus on his face. Jin's features loomed over her, and as the image became clearer, she was aware of the preoccupation in his expression. He shook his head impatiently.

"What did those thugs do to you?" He asked softly.

"I..." Shishi was beyond words by this point, and she shook her head weakly, indicating that she could not respond.

"They slammed her against a wall." Hikari said anxiously. "The guy pushed really hard against her — do you think he did some damage?"

"More likely she hit her head when he did it." Jin put his fingers to Shishi's brow, then bit his lip. "She's not fevered, but her eyes are strange. I think she's concussed. Dammit, Shishi! We shouldn't have left Hengei if you weren't right! You should have said..."

"I was all right... then." Shishi murmured, struggling to sit up as she slowly felt her senses returning to normal. She shivered involuntarily, gazing up at him. "Shit. Sorry. I didn't mean to puke up like that."

"You can puke all you want." Jin said with a sigh. "But not when we're in the middle of nowhere. You can't tell me you're fine now, Shishi. At the very least you hit your head, I'm sure of it."

"I guess... maybe when he shoved me." Shishi agreed. She reached a hand up to her brow, grimacing. "I feel woozy and all over the place. Guess fallin' over that stone was just the last straw — once I was down, I couldn't get up again. Dammit... I'm sorry."

"We're not far from the village." Hikari reminded them. "Shishi, can you make it that far?"

Shishi bit her lip.

"I don't know." She admitted. "Sittin' still like this, I feel better. But... walkin'..."

"Here." Jin loosened the gourd, holding it out to her. "Drink some of this, an' Hikari and I'll think what we should do. It's not so very far, an' I might be able to carry you... maybe. Although you ain't exactly a lightweight..."

"Shut your face." Shishi glared at him, and he grinned.

"That sounds more like you." He said, and Shishi could hear the relief in his tones. "You're still pale, though. Give me some warnin' if you're goin' to chuck up again, okay? I don't want to be caught in the

crossfire, but we ain't gonna get you to the village if Hikari an' I don't help you somehow."

"Yeah, yeah." Shishi took a sip of the water, setting the gourd aside. "I feel better than I did. Maybe I'll be okay... if you help me stand."

"We both will." Hikari suggested, holding out her arms to support Shishi's other side as between them they hauled her to her feet. As they did so, she took a faltering step, biting her lip as the world swam once more before her vision.

"I can't see straight." She whispered.

"All right. Sit down again, before you fall down." Jin instructed, and Shishi sank back to the floor. "That ain't gonna work. We need a plan B."

"I could go on ahead to the village and ask for help." Hikari suggested. "And you stay with Shishi this time."

"Let you go off on your own?" Jin shook his head. "After this morning? Not a chance. Shishi's already in a state because I listened to you two once. I'm not doing it again. No, we stay together. We'll just have to find a way to carry her, that's all. It's not far... I guess we'll just have to and I'll hope for the best that she doesn't sick up all over my clothes."

"I'm not going to hurl." Shishi objected weakly. "I've done that already. I just feel dizzy an' strange. That's all."

"Well, don't you damn well pass out." Jin ordered. "Keep drinkin' the water an' sit still. Let me work this out."

"Jin, don't look now, but we have company." Hikari remarked, and Shishi glanced up, seeing that her friend was right and a cluster of three or four children stood on the pathway before them, staring at them with a mixture of curiosity and surprise.

"Great. An audience." Shishi groaned, sinking back against Jin with a sigh of resignation. "Brats. Just what I need."

"No... wait." Jin frowned. "Hey, you kids — are you from the village just over the rise?"

The children exchanged looks at his question, then the tallest of the group stepped forward, nodding his head as he eyed Jin warily. He was about Eiju's age, Shishi decided, although he carried himself with more decided confidence than the eldest Ri child did, and at his waist hung a small sword not unlike the ones Shishi had once used to train

with herself.

“We’re from Shouki-mura.” He agreed. “Why? What’s it to you?”

“We’re heading towards your village from Hengei.” Hikari said quietly, offering the boy a slight, uncertain smile as she did so. “Only our friend was hurt by thieves as we left the city, and she can’t walk any further. Is there anyone in your village that might be able to help? We don’t mean you or anyone any harm — we just need assistance for our friend.”

“Geiyo-san has herbs an’ medicines.” The smallest member of the group said brightly, and the older child cast her a warning look.

You didn’t need to have said that. Let me do the talking. “He instructed.

“Geiyo-san?” Jin eyed the youngster keenly. “Is she an apothecary, then?”

“She grows herbs for healing, yes. She and her husband.” The older boy said cautiously.

“Would she help us, if we asked?” Hikari said hopefully. “We have money... we can pay for her services. Please... it’s hot and dusty out here, and our friend needs help.”

The older boy eyed them for a moment. Then, slowly, he nodded his head.

“I think you’re telling the truth.” He admitted. “And that girl looks like she’s gonna faint. Guess she *does* need Geiyo-san’s remedies.”

“I’m not going to faint.” Shishi objected, although even as she said the words, she wasn’t sure of their truth. “I just can’t walk any more. That’s all.”

“Kiki, run to the village and get someone to come help.” The boy turned to the small child, who nodded, offering the group a wide smile before turning and trotting off in the direction of the village.

“Thank you.” Jin said softly. The boy shrugged.

“What’s your names?” He asked bluntly.

“Jin.” Jin said. “And my friends are Hikari and Shishi.”

“You don’t look like you come from Hengei.” Another boy remarked, and his senior cuffed him smartly.

“Don’t say things like that.” He scolded. “You know it’s rude.”

"It's all right. We don't come from Hengei." Hikari shook her head. "We've come to visit Sairou from Kounan."

"You came all the way from the South?" The remaining child, a girl of about nine with her hair pulled back by ribbons demanded, and Jin nodded.

"Yes." He agreed evenly. "None of us have ever been to Sairou before... it's a first for us all."

"We never get visitors from outside." The younger boy, not noticeably quashed by his scolding, eyed them keenly. "So you're what Kounan people look like, huh?"

"I guess." Jin nodded.

"*You* look like the one in the stories." The oldest child admitted, pointing at Shishi. "People from Kounan came to Sairou once, before I was born. They came to find something and raise Suzaku. Our Celestial Warriors helped them, then."

"That's right." Jin agreed.

"One of them was my father." Shishi added blurrily. "Tasuki."

"Really?" The older boy looked suspicious, and Hikari nodded.

"Yes." She agreed. "My father was here too. Tamahome."

"Then you're friends of Byakko's people." The girl said decidedly. "Byakko is the God that protects Sairou, and if you're friends of his people, then you must be friends of ours too. Right? So it's a good thing we're going to help you. Geiyo-san always says that the Celestial Warriors aren't like other people, they're special... because they're holy people. Chosen by the Gods — they're not normal like other people are. And that Sairou is free because of them."

"They're all dead now though, huh?" Hikari said softly, and the girl frowned, shaking her head.

"Toroki lives in a cave." She said frankly. "Geiyo-san knows where, but she never tells us because we're not allowed to disturb one of the Chosen in her holy work. An' Amefuri..."

"Shut up, Fumi." The elder boy said sharply at this point. "We're not telling them about those things. They're from the south — they don't need to know."

"It's all right. We're interested to know about your Celestial Warriors." Hikari said, but the elder boy shook his head.

“We don’t need to.” He said pragmatically. “Toroki and Amefuri are gone. They don’t live in the village any more. So we don’t talk about them. Not even Geiyo-san. And you don’t need to either. You don’t come from Sairou, so it doesn’t concern you.”

“Kiki will be back soon with someone to help.” The younger boy added. “Geiyo-san is a good healer. Your friend will be fine then.”

“No doubt.” Jin murmured, and even in her dazed state Shishi could hear the thoughtful note in her companion’s tones.

“Toroki an’ Amefuri, huh.” She mused. “Well, if this Geiyo person knows anything about them, no doubt we’ll find a way to ask her. Maybe it’s a good thing I’m hurt, after all — it might be the opportunity we need to find out what we need to know!”

Chapter 7

Chapter Six

“Well, it’s not ideal, but it’s better than the open desert.”

As the tired group of Kutou soldiers reached one of the few watering holes that dotted around the barren, dusty terrain, Hyoushin cast a glance around him, nodding his head slowly in approval. “This was well located, Suiko — I trust the water is clean enough for us to drink?”

“It is pure.” Suiko nodded her head, offering him a flirtatious, teasing smile as she pranced towards him, resting her hands playfully on his shoulders. “Are you not cross with me any more then, Hyoushin? You were mean earlier — I don’t like it when you’re mean.”

“Will you stop doing that?” Hyoushin sent her a long suffering glance, and Miramu smirked, dropping down beneath the shade of one of the resilient desert trees that had taken advantage of the rare pooling water to set down roots.

“A woman with no substance and a man without a soul. I think you make a rather nice couple.” He reflected lazily, resting his hands behind his head as he watched the soldiers tethering their horses, dropping their belongings with relief as many of them headed to the pool to collect water. “Hyoushin, you should be nicer to Suiko. She’s probably the only woman who’ll ever show you that kind of attention.”

“Considering that you owe me your life, Miramu, you could thank me by being silent.” Came Hyoushin’s even-tempered response. “We’re all tired, and thanks to your previous antics, we’re sheltering in a less than perfect location. If there is a dust storm or something of that nature...”

“There won’t be.” Miramu shrugged his shoulders. “The air is all wrong — there’s not enough of a breeze and what little there is isn’t blowing in from the right way. The mountains are sheltering this location — don’t worry so much. This is as safe a place as any in the desert.”

“Well, I won’t pretend I’m not glad to be stopping.” Aoiketsu admitted, reaching down to rub his legs with a rueful grimace.

“Riding all that way, and now this... I’m fit to drop.”

“I think we all are.” Maichu flopped back on the hard ground beside him. “I could sleep for a week, at the very least.”

“No stamina.” Miramu mocked, and Maichu cast him a glare.

“The Commander’s right about you.” He said darkly. “Because of you and your bloodthirsty behaviour, we don’t get to sleep in beds tonight.”

“If you’re that bothered, I’m sure I can easily make you sleep. Very soundly indeed.” Miramu twitched his fingers, the glitter of his dagger appearing in his grip. “Keep it in mind — I’ve no qualms about introducing you to my bloodthirsty behaviour, as you call it.”

“Just because I don’t have a ship to throw you overboard from, Miramu, my words to you still stand.” Hyoushin said sharply. “You will not threaten nor harm any of my men while on this mission. To do so would be tantamount to treason against Kutou’s Emperor. And even if you don’t care about that, I do. Sairou’s Shinzahou or not, I will renege on my vow to protect you and slay you myself.”

His eyes narrowed, and for the briefest of instances Miramu was aware of a flicker of cold flame in the impassive amethyst eyes.

“I am a good swordsman.” The Meihi added quietly. “I do not take the pleasure in execution that you do, but when I undertake the task, I rarely fail.”

“Threatening words.” Miramu taunted, a grin touching his features as he put his dagger away. “Don’t worry. I don’t think your men are worth my energy to attack. Besides, there’s no benefit in it for me, is there? If I annoy your Emperor too much, he won’t pay me. And that won’t suit anyone. So relax. Your flock of sheep are safe enough from me.”

“Don’t call us sheep, else *you* might not be safe from *us*.” Maichu warned, and Miramu laughed.

“Consider me corrected.” He said lazily. “Either way, I’m tired too, you know. I did come on this journey with you.”

“Well, the night will begin to draw in soon.” Hyoushin gazed across at the skyline. “Kayu, I want you to take two others and gather what you can for firewood. It’s still warm now, but the desert will be cold at night and we can’t afford to be unprepared. Maichu, you and Aoiketsu have the supplies we acquired from Kaidou — I entrust to you the task of rationing enough for us to each eat something.”

“Yes sir.” The soldiers dispersed as soon as Hyoushin’s orders had been spoken, and Miramu cast him a faint, amused smile.

“They mightn’t admit it, but they are your sheep.” He observed. “They don’t question, they just obey. What a dull life that must be.”

“Perhaps, but it is better than the kind of life of one who slays his own flesh and blood.” Hyoushin said evenly. “Suiko, rather than hang all over me like an unwanted fur stole, perhaps you might prepare water for our journey tomorrow? If the source here is pure, we will doubtless need it on our trek tomorrow.”

“You’re still mean.” Suiko sighed, but obediently disentangled her arms from around his shoulders. “All right, Mean Hyoushin. I’ll do as you say.”

She flounced towards the water’s edge, and Hyoushin sighed, slowly shaking his head.

“The longer I spend in her company, the more I wonder about Seiryuu’s divine power.” He murmured, more to himself than anything. “Can her prediction even be trusted? Will collecting the Shinzahou bring Seiryuu no Miko to Kutou and can she save the East from itself? I really do wonder.”

“Kutou is a shambles.” Miramu reflected, and Hyoushin glanced at him in surprise.

“Yes, I have ears. I can hear your mumbling.” Miramu nodded. “Even if you do speak with an unemotional, unexotic Eastern dialect, I’m not deaf.”

“My words were addressed to noone in particular.” Hyoushin shrugged.

“Even so, mine are addressed to you.” Miramu responded evenly. “Your country is desperate indeed, if it relies on the power of Beast Gods to save it.”

“Desperation is a dangerous state of mind.” Hyoushin murmured. “I won’t pretend I don’t worry about it. You may have lost all sense of loyalty to your land, assassin, but I have not lost mine.”

“A country that probably killed your family, and who enslaved, brutalised and humiliated you, no doubt.” Miramu said baldly, watching his companion for any reaction or flicker of emotion. “Why are you such a fool as that, Hyoushin? You are still a slave, you know. Kintsusei-sama may have offered you your life, but you haven’t taken it. You’ve become his slave, instead of your master’s. Do you really

consider this life any different from the one you lived before?"

"Kintsusei-sama has never beaten me." Hyoushin's expression remained impassive, although Miramu could hear a faint note of something else in the man's tones, and he frowned, recognising it as the unusual inflection of a Meihi accent that the Commander normally suppressed. He eyed his companion keenly, realising that it was a sign that, however outwardly composed Hyoushin seemed, inwardly his words had struck a nerve. He pursed his lips.

"And you are content, living that way?" He asked. "You are as pitiful a creature as Toroki and those Seishi for Suzaku. They are willing slaves, too — they have no concept of life or living it. And nor do you."

"I don't believe that's your business." Hyoushin shrugged his shoulders.

"No, most things aren't my business." Miramu admitted. "But I'm already universally hated. Why should I care if I offend someone?"

"Yes, I suppose that is a logical reply from a man such as you." Hyoushin met his gaze, nodding his head. "And to answer your question, yes. I am content. Besides, no man in Kutou is free until the East is at peace within itself. We are all slaves to war, Miramu. And until I can say that all the people in the Dragon's land are free, I do not concern myself with my own freedom. I have not been forced to take this path — I chose it. That is what makes it different. I am a soldier who serves his Emperor. Not a slave who serves his master. The parallel you draw is flawed."

"Perhaps." Miramu murmured, his brow furrowing as inside him he felt the faintest pang of envy at the other man's words. Confused, he shook his head as if to clear it, stifling the impulse before it could spread.

"Why would I be jealous of this cold, soulless man who only obeys and does not live?" He wondered inwardly, glancing down at his hands. "Do I not live the freer life of the two of us? Wretched as it is, being Geiyo Miramu — surely it is worse being the Meihi Hyoushin?"

"Tomorrow, will we encounter the hermit Toroki?" Hyoushin's voice cut through his thoughts and he looked thoughtful, nodding his head as other, yet more painful thoughts teetered at the edge of his consciousness. He sank back against the tree, rummaging lazily in his pocket for the pouch of herbal stems as he placed one between his teeth pensively.

“Most likely.” He agreed. “At least, you will. I’ve no intention of entering her cave or seeing the girl. You do Seiryuu’s bidding... I’ll wait outside. So long as you keep your half of the deal, I won’t need to worry.”

“I don’t intend to kill her.” Hyoushin shook his head. “I’m not like you in that regard.”

“I would not kill Toroki.” Miramu said gravely.

“So Byakko’s land still does have ties on you, then.”

“It curses me to admit it, but I suppose it does.” Miramu agreed wryly. “Don’t worry yourself about them, though. They are insignificant enough. Besides, Toroki isn’t of a violent disposition. At least, not when I knew her. Who knows how time and the treasure have changed her? But she was always a peaceful soul, as a child. I imagine that won’t have altered much.”

“You do indeed sound intimately acquainted with this girl, Miramu.” Hyoushin eyed him suspiciously, and Miramu shrugged his shoulders.

“We grew up in the same village, a lifetime ago.” He said carelessly. “But when I was fourteen, I killed my father and I left the area for good. She was ten at the time... and I doubt her mother or father would have cared too much that she was away from my influence, given the nature of my so-called crime. So I did know her, once. But I don’t pretend I know her now. And I have no intention of renewing the acquaintance. I have no time for Byakko or his peculiar interpretation of slavery.”

He brushed his tongue absently against the herb stem, tasting the bitterness as he did so.

“Tomorrow, I will lead you to the cave she hides in.” He added. “Then the rest is up to you.”

“How are you feeling now, Shishi-san?”

As the redhaired bandit sank down onto the comfortable mattress with a sigh, the tall, dark-haired woman cast her a compassionate look, settling herself down beside the bed. “Your arm has stopped bleeding, and your colour is a little better, but you must have taken quite a whack.”

It was later that afternoon and, after the young girl Kiki had returned with the apothecary’s tall, strapping husband, the injured

bandit had been hoisted into his arms, carried briskly down the uneven pathway to the little house which served as their family home. The children had quickly been dispersed as the woman in residence had realised Shishi was truly not well, and so now, twenty minutes after their arrival in Shouki-mura, the three young travellers found themselves in the simply furnished back room of the property. All had been struck by the easy, unquestioning way in which the woman had offered her services, and even the wary Jin had relaxed some as he had realised that these people truly did mean to help, not harm.

“The world’s stopped spinning some.” Shishi admitted ruefully now, in answer to the apothecary’s question. “I guess... it’s a good thing I decided to flop out not far from your village, Geiyo-san. I swear, if that guy had carried me any further...”

“We’re grateful for your helping us.” Jin added from the doorway. “Geiyo-san, if we can pay you something for your services... Shishi was an idiot and threw herself into a stupid situation, but so long as she’s okay, that’s what matters most.”

“It’s all right.” The apothecary smiled, even as Shishi shot her bandit friend a dark look. “Really. I’m glad I could help you young people — isn’t it a long trek to come all the way from Kounan like this?”

“We’re sort of on a specific mission.” Hikari sighed, dropping down on the end of her friend’s makeshift bed with a grimace. “We didn’t expect to encounter thugs like that in Hengei. It seemed like such a nice town.”

“There are thugs everywhere there are cities.” The woman said sadly. “At peace or at war, such is a fact of life.”

“That’s what I said.” Jin nodded. “And why I’m not happy letting you girls out of my sight. Kashira’d freak if anything happened to you, Shishi. An’ Chichiri’d do the same for you, Hikari — he’s about adopted you of late.”

“Chichiri?” The apothecary looked startled. “But that’s...”

“Ri Hou Jun.” Jin offered her a rueful smile. “Force of habit there... forgive me. He’s not so different from you, actually, Geiyo-san. He grows herbs for healing, too, in a village not far from the mountains in Kounan.”

“I see.” The woman frowned, and for a moment she was silent. Then she returned the smile.

“I’d rather you called me Anara.” She said at length. “That’s my

name. Hearing Geiyo-san is all very well from the village children, but from young people of your ages, well, it makes me feel old. Besides, my husband's name is Geiyo. Mine only is by marriage... I've never entirely been used to it in everyday circles."

"All right. If you prefer." Jin looked startled. "Anara-san, then."

"And you needn't worry about payment." Anara continued. "To be honest, it's good to use my skills to some benefit. But I am curious as to why you three have come all this way. We don't get visitors in Shouki very often — and even in Hengei, most people are traders who don't trek into the desert. You must have come this way for a reason — or are you lost? If so, perhaps we can help you find your way out — the desert can be a maze but not to those who've grown up around it."

"We're not lost. Not yet." Hikari shook her head. "Well, I suppose coming here is a detour, but we... we were heading this way. It's hot, travelling like this, and we did hope we might find food and water here on our trip. And maybe... maybe information. If... if we could."

She pinkened slightly as Anara sent her a quizzical look.

"Information?" She asked gently. "You came to Sairou looking for information? And you wound up here, in Shouki-mura? I don't understand."

Jin sighed.

"The truth is, Shishi getting the hell kicked out of her is something of a setback." He admitted. "But one of the children who helped us said something to us that might make our visit here more productive than we expected. They said you knew somethin' about Celestial Warriors of Byakko... specifically a chick known by the name of Toroki."

"Toroki?" Anara's expression transformed in an instant, and Hikari was certain that she saw the woman pale at the mention of the Seishi's name. "That's why you're here? Because you're hunting Toroki?"

"We're not hunting her." Jin held up his hands hastily. "Nothing like that."

"We wouldn't come to Sairou to hurt one of their Seishi." Hikari added. "We just want to ask her advice. Her help. It's something that we think she might be able to do — to tell us, or... or well, we've been told that she lives somewhere around this area. In a cave, one of the children said. But..."

“I see.” Anara ran her fingers through her hair, then, slowly, she shook her head.

“I’m sorry.” She murmured. “Toroki left this village four years ago. She hasn’t been back since and noone has seen her. I can’t help you with what you want to know.”

She cast Shishi a glance, raising a finger to touch her brow.

“Your friend needs to rest.” She added, as if she considered the subject closed. “Concussion is tricky. My remedy will help take the edge off the nausea and the dizziness, and the wound to the arm is not serious — it will heal fairly quickly, I think. But there’s no real cure bar sleep and time for a blow to the head.”

“Time we don’t have.” Jin said sadly. “Especially if you don’t know where Toroki is, Anara-san. We’ll have to do a whole lot more searchin’ — are you saying she won’t be fit to travel on today?”

“Not today and perhaps not tomorrow, either.” Anara said evenly. She shook her head. “Not with a concussion like this.”

“Shit.” Shishi groaned, casting Jin a beseeching look. “Jin, you ain’t going to take notice of that, are you? We can’t stop around here for two days — we don’t have time to do that! And I’ll be okay! Tomorrow morning — I’ll be fine. You’ll see! I’ll be okay... I’m tougher than that.”

“We’re going to follow the expert’s advice, Shi-chan.” Jin shook his head. “I’m not going to get tessen-flamed for taking gambles on your life.”

“You’re welcome to stay here.” Anara assured them. “It’s not often we have guests... I’d like it, if you’d stay.”

She got to her feet, casting Shishi a backwards glance as she did so.

“I’ll bring you some water, and then you really should rest.” She added softly. “You’ll take no harm from the blow, I don’t believe, so long as you don’t push yourself too hard.”

With that she was gone, and Shishi buried her head in her hands.

“I’m sorry.” She said sheepishly. “Guess there goes our quick plan into the desert, huh?”

“Well, what’s done is done.” Jin said with a shrug. “Don’t look like that... it wasn’t your fault. Even if you were foolhardy, goin’ at those guys, I won’t pretend I’d have done any different in the circumstances. It’s just a good thing for all of us that Hikari has a good imagination,

even if she doesn't have any sword fightin' skill."

"People in this world are superstitious." Hikari reflected. "That's all."

She sighed, kicking her legs idly against the edge of the bed.

"And I don't think Anara-san was telling us the truth, either." She said frankly. "Did you see her, when we mentioned Toroki? She went white. She knows something about this girl we're looking for. But she didn't want to tell us."

"Well, we are strangers." Jin reasoned. "And from the South, too. I suppose no matter how helpful she is with treating Shishi's concussion, that doesn't mean she wants to tell us all her country's secrets."

"It wasn't like that." Hikari shook her head. "It was more like... the question frightened her. Not that she thought we were prying into things that weren't our business. It was like it actually worried her that we'd ask."

"Meanin' what?" Shishi demanded, leaning back against her pillows as she cast her friend a quizzical look. "You're goin' to have to join the dots for me, Hiki. I ain't thinkin' on all cylinders right now."

"Nothing new about that, kid." Jin looked amused. "But now you say it, Hikari — didn't those kids act the same way? When one of them told us somethin', the older told them to button it."

"And the kid mentioned Amefuri as well as Toroki." Hikari remembered, her brow creasing in consternation. "As if... but Taiitsukun said that Amefuri had turned away from Byakko. I'm sure she did. And that we shouldn't seek him out. She wouldn't have been so adamant about us seeing Toroki, if they were together. Would she?"

"Maybe it's not Amefuri that's making this dame upset." Shishi suggested. "Perhaps there's somethin' about Toroki we don't know."

"You think she might be dangerous?" Jin asked sharply, and Shishi shrugged.

"Dunno." She said frankly. "I know as much as you. An' that's less than Hiki — Hiki, what did that Taiitsukun person say about Toroki exactly? As close as you can remember — what did she tell you?"

"That she was of a peaceful disposition." Hikari frowned. "And that she wouldn't be looking for a fight. That we'd have to negotiate to get the Shinzahou from her, and it would be hard. But that she wouldn't

fight us.”

“Then Toroki can’t be dangerous, surely?” Jin pointed out. “Doesn’t Taiitsukun know everything when it comes to things like this?”

“I don’t know.” Hikari admitted. “Can anyone really know everything?”

“Ain’t she like, Emperor of the Heavens, though?” Shishi remarked. “S’why only people like Papa an’ Chichiri an’ you can go see her, because you’re connected to the Gods direct. I guess Jin’s right. She’d know.”

“Although I guess it doesn’t mean there aren’t things she hasn’t told us.” Hikari ran her fingers through her hair absently, shaking her head. “I don’t know what we should do. Obviously we can’t go anywhere while Shishi’s still seeing double, and Anara-san has said we can stay here. I think she’s a nice person — she and her husband both seem kind. But... her reaction bothers me. I don’t know why she’d be afraid just by hearing Toroki’s name.”

“Perhaps she’s freaked out by the divine.” Shishi managed a faint smile. “Or more likely, she knows that when Papa an’ company came here, one of the Byakko Seishi snuffed it helpin’ them to escape. That might be it.”

“You know, you’re calling Kashira Papa a lot.” Jin cast her a glance. “You must really be feelin’ out of it... you don’t usually forget so easily.”

Shishi grimaced.

“There’s noone here to hear me, ’cept you guys.” She responded. “And I’m tired. Let me alone, huh? I’ve already puked my guts up once today... don’t pick on me.”

“Are you feeling any better?” Hikari eyed her doubtfully. “You still look really kinda pale.”

“I don’t know.” Shishi admitted. She sighed, shaking her head gingerly as if trying to clear it.

“T’be honest, I don’t think I could do much more walkin’ today.” She added sadly. “I want to... I don’t want to be holdin’ everyone up because I let my guard down an’ that jerk got the better of me. But I think... if I try an’ get up right now... I might throw up again. Or pass out. I thought I might do that when that guy was carryin’ me back here. It sucks but I don’t think I am all right. An’ I guess I’m gonna haveta listen to Anara-san’s advice an’ sit put. At least... well, we’ll

see how I am tomorrow mornin', huh? If I can, I want to leave then. I'll rest this afternoon, an' I'll do my best to sleep it off."

"All right." Jin pursed his lips. "But be straight with us, okay? You're more important than Byakko's treasure, and Kashira'd say so too. I ain't gonna face him an' explain what happened if you get killed... an' I think Anara-san knows what she's talkin' about. She sounded... sorta like Chichiri-san, when she was examinin' you. I think she's done this a long time. An' she grows herbs, too, jus' like Chichiri-san an' Aidou-san do in the Eastern village. So we should listen to her."

"What if Kutou are already here though?" Hikari asked softly, and Jin shot her a startled look.

"Hikari?"

"That really makes me feel a lot better, saying stuff like that." Shishi added, and Hikari pinkened, shaking her head.

"Sorry... I didn't mean it that way." She said hastily. "It's just... I don't know. I wonder about them. Taiitsukun said they were making preparations. They had a lot further to come than us, but..."

"We don't know a lot about our enemy, really, do we?" Jin's expression became thoughtful, and Hikari shrugged.

"We know that Miramu is a stupid jerk who kidnaps children to get what he wants." She said darkly, and Jin pursed his lips.

"We do, but that's about all we know." He said with a sigh. "We know the Emperor is gathering Shinzahou. We know that's a bad thing. But we... what else do we know? It's been buggin' me a bit, actually, while we've been travelling. I was always taught that fightin' an enemy is only a good idea if you know that enemy. You can't win a battle you don't understand. I think that's why we lost the Seiryuu earring, t'be honest. Because think about it. We had no idea who Miramu was. We still don't, really. We had no idea where Kutou's people were or what they were thinkin'. But Miramu knew the way to get us to cooperate with him. He knew where Chichiri's family were. He took the one person that Chichiri'd probably die for most readily. An' when we met him in the forest, he knew Kashira an' Chichiri-san by name. More'n that, he knew what kind of fighters they were."

"Meaning that Kutou have been watching us? Studying us?" Hikari looked alarmed. "Do you think so...?"

"No..." Jin chewed down on his lip thoughtfully. "If they had been, Hikari, I think they'd have figured out who you were, an' Miramu'd

have taken more interest in you. As it is, I don't think he's even from Kutou. I think he's a hired agent — someone who's doin' the dirty work of this Kintsusei-sama guy in the East. But he did his homework on Suzaku Seishi an' it paid off."

"Maybe, but how does that help us?" Shishi demanded. Jin shrugged.

"I don't know if it does." He admitted. "But I do know that if we encounter Kutou, we're goin' to have to be damn careful. They don't know about us or Hikari — not like they seem to about Kashira an' Chichiri. An' if we do encounter them, it might not be a bad thing. I mean, we might find somethin' out — the more we know, the easier we can avoid them. Right?"

"You make no sense." Hikari groaned. "You want us to meet them so we can avoid them. Isn't that what you just said?"

Jin grinned ruefully, scratching his head.

"I guess I'm not as good a tactician as Kashira or Aniki." He admitted. "But something like that. I don't say we should fight them — hell, I don't want to fight them if we can avoid it. Not with Shishi below par, especially. Hikari, no offence, but you're not exactly skilled in that department."

"None taken. I know my magic is unpredictable and unreliable." Hikari said with a sigh. "Truth is, I've not felt even a flicker of it since we left Kounan. I'm starting to wonder if it only works in proximity to Suzaku's Shichi Seishi."

"Even more reason for us to be cautious." Jin acknowledged. "But if we did encounter them... we should try an' learn everything we can about them. Because this ain't just about Byakko's Shinzahou, is it? So long as Hikari stays with us, in this world, sooner or later they'll come lookin' for her, too. An' if we're goin' to protect her, we need to know what we're up against."

"That's creepy." Hikari shivered. "Let's not focus on that, okay?"

"If Hiki went back to her world, would she be safe?" Shishi asked, and Jin shrugged.

"I don't know." He admitted. "Hikari, what did Taiitsukun say about you staying in our world?"

"Just that it was my decision, as it had always been." Hikari rubbed her temples. "I think that it's a lose-lose situation. If I go back... I can't make any kind of a difference. I can't summon Suzaku — although

Taiitsukun was depressingly negative about me doing that. Something about me not being my mother — or something. But so long as I'm here, there's that chance. That we could stop this by summoning Suzaku and asking him to halt Kutou's ambitions. So long as I'm here, that's a possibility. But... so long as I'm here..."

"Suzaku no Shinzahou is within enemy reach." Jin finished. "I get you. Either way it sucks."

"Right." Hikari nodded. "Either way it does."

She leant back against the wall, shrugging her shoulders.

"I'm resigned to being here, though. Now." She added. "Until this is finished... I'm going to stay. With all of you. I want to help. So my going home isn't an issue."

"I'm glad about that." Shishi admitted. "You're weird as hell, Hiki, but I kinda like havin' you around."

"You say *I'm* weird." Hikari snorted. "*You're* fourteen and you wave a sword at people."

"I'm almost fifteen."

"That makes it different?"

"No, but I'm sick of being the youngest." Shishi pulled a graphic face. "Jin an' me are taking care of you, you know. Not the other way around."

"Who saved your skin in Hengei?" Hikari raised an eyebrow, brushing her fingers against the sword which Reizeitei had given her.

"Hotohori-sama." Shishi said promptly. "And we both know it."

Jin chuckled.

"You two are bad as one another, but it makes for interestin' travellin'." He observed. "An' you are soundin' more like yourself, Shi-chan. Even if you do still look like a ghost."

"Then I guess I'll rest up some more, an' hope I'm fit to leave tomorrow." Shishi decided. "And with or without Anara-san's help, we're gonna track down Toroki no matter what!"

Chapter 8

Chapter Seven

It had been some times since they had had visitors from so far away.

Anara pushed open the door of the smallest room in the house, casting a slow, wistful glance around as she felt memories flickering at the back of her mind. Though the room was barren now, devoid of any sign of life, there were still the faintest clues that once it had been more than a spare storage space, and as her gaze fell on the dusty, worn figure of a hand-stitched rag-doll, she felt tears welling up in her indigo eyes.

But they had come seeking Toroki.

She stepped into the small room, scooping up the rag-doll and absently brushing her fingers against the dark woven hair as she fought against her emotions.

It had been four years, she reflected sadly. Four years since the day the Seishi had left Shouki-mura forever... as if walking out of the village and out of existence as she disappeared into the hazy, dust-stormy Kanin mountains.

“Another blade through my heart.” She murmured, clutching the doll tightly in her fingers. “There’s no lie in the fact that the God’s work asks sacrifices of all who are connected to his divine power. Even those of us who have no power at all. Byakko-kami-sama, I have kept faith — I will always keep faith. But why you had to cause my family so much suffering — was it really all for the benefit of Sairou, in the end?”

“Anara-san?”

A voice from the doorway made her turn, and she sighed, setting the doll aside as she registered Hikari in the doorway.

“Can I help you. Hikari-san?” She asked softly. “Does your friend need my help — is she feeling unwell?”

“No... I just... I heard you talking to someone, but there’s no one else here.” Hikari said slowly, pinkening slightly as she seemed to realise how incoherent her explanation sounded. “I..you look upset and I... I suppose I’m poking my nose in where it’s not wanted, aren’t

I? I mean..."

"No..it's all right." Anara hesitated, then gestured for her young visitor to come join her. "I've been thinking about this, and I think I've decided... come sit down."

"Decided what?" Hikari did as she was bidden, casting her companion a questioning look.

"You came here to find Toroki, didn't you?" Anara said softly, and Hikari nodded.

"Yes. We did." She agreed.

"Will you tell me the reason why?"

"We... we think we need her help." Hikari twisted her fingers together in her lap. "It's sort of hard to explain. But... we were told that she had something that... that we might need. And that... that she might have some advice... for us to take back to Kounan with us. We... we're here not to cause trouble, but... but Kounan and all of the four Kingdoms might be in danger, and so..."

"You seek Byakko's Shinzahou?" Anara asked gently. Hikari started, nodding her head.

"Yes. How do you...?"

"Suzuno-sama's hand mirror." Anara said softly. "The treasure left to Sairou by Byakko no Miko. You seek to take this, then, to Kounan?"

"I... I suppose so." Hikari admitted. "But we won't hurt Toroki. I mean, that's not why we're here. It's just... something is threatening the whole of this world and..."

"All life will be sucked out of it, as each of the stars in the sky is extinguished." Anara murmured. "Trees will drop their leaves, hearts will cease to beat, and no more birds will fly in the skies above our heads. The soul of the world will be erased forever, and so will everything else."

Hikari's eyes widened, and Anara nodded her head.

"That's what you think, isn't it?" She asked evenly. "That's what you want to speak to Toroki about. About the fate of this world, as I've just described it."

"Yes... but..."

"The only thing I don't understand is how you've come to hear such a prophesy."

"I didn't hear it. I saw it for myself." Hikari admitted. Then her hand flew to her mouth, as if she had said something she should not. "Oh! I mean..."

"You saw it?" Anara eyed her keenly. "And who are you, Hikari-san? I was not mistaken, was I, when your friend spoke of Chichiri? He is, is he not, a Suzaku Celestial Warrior? A servant to the Phoenix as Toroki is to the Tiger?"

"Yes." Hikari looked sheepish. "He is. But I'm not sure..."

"He is your father?"

"No." Hikari shook her head. "I just stay with his family... at least I do more recently. My parents are close friends of his, you see. His and Shishi's father — Tasuki."

"So this is a divine calling? You come here on Suzaku's work?"

"In a way, I guess we do."

"And that is why you seek Toroki?"

"Mm." Hikari nodded. Then, "Anara-san, how do you know about the world? I mean, the danger... the destruction. You described it almost exactly as I saw it — how could you do that?"

Her eyes widened.

"*You*... aren't Toroki, are you?"

"No." Anara smiled, despite herself. "I'm not Toroki. But you are close to the mark. The words are hers, not mine. I heard them so many times they burned themselves into my brain. The number of times she'd cry out in dreams, or sob them into my chest as I tried to calm her down..."

She hesitated, fighting with her composure as she reached for the doll once more, brushing her hand against it absently as if trying to draw some scant comfort from its soft form.

"Toroki saw what you saw." She said at length. "The end of this world."

"Then she did used to live here? That was true?"

"Yes." Anara nodded. "And closer than you think."

She glanced at the doll, then,

"This was hers." She murmured. "When she was only a baby, I stitched it for her. She would take it everywhere with her, when she

was still a child. Until she was ten years old... she was... but things changed, then. Things changed..."

Hikari's eyes widened.

"Toroki... lived in this house?" She whispered. "You and she... are family?"

"Toroki is my daughter." Anara nodded, pain in her gaze as she met Hikari's dumbstruck hazel eyes with her own dark indigo ones. 'Geiyo Myoume. I gave her the name "Bright Eyes" because she inherited my blue eyes over her father's dark ones and I was proud that she did... but... but the name grew to have a second meaning — as she grew up it became something of a curse in itself. She was Byakko's, and never truly mine, Hikari. You have no idea of the pain a mother feels when she realises her child has a higher calling that transcends even family love."

"I'm sorry." Hikari bit her lip. "I guess that must suck... especially if she just took off one day and didn't come back."

"No... it wasn't so simple as that." Anara sighed, shaking her head. "The truth is, Hikari-chan, that I was relieved when Myoume left the village. Don't get me wrong — I love my daughter.' As Hikari looked startled. "But... well, she wasn't my only child. I had a son, too, four years older, but he... it's fair to say he died in all our hearts when Myoume was ten years old. They were close — very close — and it was then that I began to lose my little girl to Byakko's spell."

She fingered the doll's worn clothing, then,

"Myoume always had Byakko's blood flowing through her." She murmured. "The sign of Toroki and the visions and dreams that it brought. But as a small child, they were always fairly minor. Even the nightmares we were able to quell — to comfort and talk away. Some of my neighbours thought her a little odd, but she was never really isolated. After all, she always had her brother to protect her from the worst of the stares. But after my son..."

She closed her eyes, aware of the tears that had begun to form on her lashes.

"The day I lost my beloved son was the first day Myoume had that vision." She whispered. "It was dark and different from the others, and it kept on coming back. As time went on, her power became more and more defined, and she had more and more disturbing delusions and dreams. As she grew, she began to lose her grasp on herself and her sanity — Myoume became swallowed up by Toroki and I found it hard

to tell them apart. But most of all I found it hardest to see my daughter suffer so much. I couldn't do anything... in the end, even my being near her caused her more pain, not less."

She rubbed her temples, as if struggling to decide something, and Hikari waited patiently for her host to unburden herself further.

At length the woman looked up, faint indecision in her indigo eyes.

"Your name, Hikari, means light." She murmured. "And it might be a coincidence... but..."

She trailed off, and Hikari frowned.

"I don't understand." She admitted. "What has my name to do with anything, Anara-san?"

"Toroki... my daughter..." Anara hesitated, then she shrugged.

"She spoke often about the end of the world." She murmured. "But... she also talked about other things. Among them, a light. A powerful, guiding light. She was never... overly coherent on what she meant. Just that somewhere in the depths of her turmoil, this light flared out and gave her something to cling onto. I think she believed it was an omen — that somehow it was connected to the future she kept seeing. And that somehow it was a means by which... the end of existence could be stayed."

Hikari's eyes opened wide with surprise.

"But..."

"I realise how strange that sounds." Anara acknowledged. "A lot of the things she said are strange even to me. But you *are* here now, Hikari-san. You and your friends, from the South, seeking my daughter and the treasure she guards with her life. And I... I do not think you are bad people. You seem genuinely concerned for the health of your friend — and the fact that you were more willing to tend to her wounds than continue on your quest has somewhat decided me that you mean Toroki no harm."

She sighed.

"It may be coincidence." She added. "But you *are* called Hikari. And Toroki did say the light would come. Ethereal, divine light... I thought it must be Byakko's, but she... she didn't think that it was. Just that... whatever it was... it reached out to her. To this world. And steadied it somehow. Through divine intervention."

Hikari was silent for a moment. Then, slowly, she nodded.

“Was it red light?” She asked hesitantly, and Anara looked startled, shrugging her shoulders.

“I don’t know.” She replied. “Toroki never told me that. Why do you ask?”

Hikari pinkened, twisting her hands together.

“No reason in particular.” She said eventually. “I just wondered... since we’re here on Suzaku’s bidding, and I... I’m called Hikari... whether it was... because of that. I mean... we are trying to stop the thing your daughter prophesied. The thing I’ve seen, too. And I... I suppose I know that my being here right now is significant in itself. So perhaps...”

She paused, her eyes widening as if she had suddenly remembered something important.

“To do so... is my destiny.” She murmured

“Hikari-san?” Anara sent her a puzzled look, and Hikari shot the woman a sheepish smile. She shrugged.

“I’m sorry. I’m just a little tired.” She said slowly. “But if I saw this world, and Toroki did too, maybe... maybe she’s expecting me to come. Maybe she wants us to have the Shinzahou, if she thinks — if she knows — that I’ve come to help.”

Anara buried her head in her hands.

“If you can take that Shinzahou away from my girl, I would be more grateful than you’d ever know.” She whispered. “She has always been charged with protecting it, and it’s strange powers are great. Yet she won’t let it go, even though it heightens her abilities and makes her life more difficult. She withdrew from the village because she knew she couldn’t be around people any more — their lives, their pasts, their futures flooding through her at the least flicker of contact. She could have abandoned the Shinzahou, but she believes in being Toroki. So she took the treasure and she left. And I have not seen her since.”

“I see.” Hikari murmured, then, “But... you do know where it is she’s gone?”

“Yes.” Anara admitted. “And I... I will tell you. So long as you promise not to harm my daughter, I will.”

“You have my word.” Hikari promised solemnly, and Anara’s heart clenched in her chest at the hope that flared in the young girl’s eyes. “And thank you. This is important to all of us. I want to... to help the people in Kounan, and stop this from happening. I want... I want to

try.”

“None of Myoume’s visions have ever been prevented.” Anara said quietly. “They have not all come true yet, but those that have have never been changed. Although she spoke of light, Hikari-san, neither she nor I could understand enough what it meant to be able to know for sure if our assumptions were sound, or wishful thinking on both our parts. And I don’t know how receptive she will be to you — as I said, she withdrew because being around people became too much for her to bear. She may not wish to speak to you — she may not wish to make contact with you at all.”

“We won’t know unless we try.” Hikari said softly, and Anara offered her a faint smile.

“I like that spirit.” She murmured. “If you are sent by Suzaku’s people... if you are associated with those men who came here and elicited the loyalty of our Seishi so long ago, I believe you don’t mean my daughter harm. And perhaps... if you can somehow help her...”

She sighed.

“Nothing can bring my son back to me.” She added bitterly. “Nothing on this Earth. I am resigned to that fact. But Myoume... perhaps... my daughter... maybe she is not yet entirely beyond my reach.”

“You really love her, don’t you?” Hikari asked gently, and Anara nodded.

“I love both my children more than my own life.” She said sadly. “But by Byakko’s will I can no longer see or speak to either of them. Such is the cruelty of life in the Beast God’s shadow, Hikari-chan. Doing divine work comes with sacrifices... at all levels.”

“I... suppose so.” Hikari frowned. “My father... my father was Tamahome, Anara-san. One of the Suzaku Seishi, like Chichiri and Tasuki. My mother was Suzaku no Miko. They fought for Kounan once. I know that they lost friends along the way... and before that, even before they had come together, some of them suffered personal pain on account of their latent power within them. I guess... I guess I know what you mean, when you talk like that. That it doesn’t matter which God — it’s still difficult.”

She smiled slightly.

“I don’t really know much about the Byakko Seishi, although Chichiri said my father once trained with the one named Tokaki.” She added. “And that they were allies during the war with Kutou, before I

was born.”

“Toroki’s spirit was reborn inside my daughter, but it’s the one past she doesn’t remember.” Anara reflected. “She knows that she was once the Toroki who fought alongside Suzuno-sama for the sake of Sairou’s peace. But she doesn’t remember it. She knows all the stories about Tokaki and Subaru, and the sacrifice of Tatara at the temple in the desert sands. She’s always been fascinated by the tales of Byakko’s people. But her own past... her own former life... has always been the one life she has never been able to see. Perhaps it makes her doubly more determined to prove herself as Toroki in this life — she feels that Toroki has not yet fulfilled her reason for existence.”

“She sounds like a very sad person.” Hikari murmured, and Anara nodded.

“I would say that’s true.” She agreed with a sigh. “But a strong one, Hikari-chan. Whatever else she is, my daughter... she’s both stubborn and strong. And completely committed to what she believes in, no matter what the cost.”

Hikari was silent for a moment, and Anara eyed her hopefully.

“You will... help my daughter, if you can?” She asked softly. Hikari nodded.

“If we can. When Shishi is well enough to travel.” She agreed. “If you can tell us where we’re going, we should catch up on ourselves in no time. It has to be better than wandering around the desert aimlessly and none of us really know Sairou as well as we might.”

She looked rueful.

“I did hope that we might get a clue as to where this treasure was, but even though we’re probably close at hand, I haven’t any idea at all.” She added. “So we really do need your help, Anara-san.”

Anara nodded.

“You and your friends must stay here so long as Shishi-san needs to rest.” She said firmly. “And then I will sketch a rough map of the mountain area for you, so you can find her cave quickly and safely. It is not easy to get to, unless you know the local paths... and I will share with you that knowledge. Do you read?”

“Chinese?” Hikari looked surprised, then she shrugged.

“Some.” She admitted sheepishly. “Not as much as I probably could. But Shishi and Jin both can — Tasuki’s made sure of it. And they’re both good at following maps, too — I’m sure that they’ll be

able to understand.”

She spread her hands.

“I’m a bit hopeless in both respects.” She acknowledged, and Anara smiled.

“You have a kind heart, however.” She observed softly. “Sometimes that can go a long way. I think... I think maybe Toroki... no, Myoume... I think she might take to you. At least, I think she will hear you out, Hikari-san.”

“I’m glad about that.” Hikari looked relieved. “Thank you, Anara-san... you have no idea how much this means to us!”

With that she flashed the apothecary a grin, disappearing out of the room as she headed back to share her news with her friends. Once alone again, Anara sat back, a pensive expression on her face.

“Nor do you know what it means to me.” She murmured, her gaze flitting to the doll once more. “Myoume-chan... do not turn these people away. I think they truly want to help you. If there is any way to retrieve my daughter from within the Celestial Warrior, please, let these people find it somehow!”

They had survived their night out of doors.

Hyoushin stood at the edge of the cluster of desert trees, gazing pensively out across the horizon as the first rays of sun began to glimmer across the sandy landscape. His gaze rested on the peaks of the Kanin mountains, and he frowned, his amethyst eyes narrowing as he contemplated the day ahead.

They were not far off, he decided, even with the illusion of distance that the sand and the hazy atmosphere provoked. And they would indeed face Toroki that day.

“And gain the Shinzahou, because I must.” He murmured softly. “For the sake of Kutou.”

“Remind me never to sleep in the desert again.”

From the makeshift camp behind him, Hyoushin could hear Maichu’s sleepy tones and a faint smile flickered across his lips as he realised his companions were beginning to stir. As he made his way back towards them, he ran his mind over the best procedure for the day’s events, remembering only too clearly Miramu’s words the night before about the Celestial Warrior who guarded Byakko’s treasure.

“He won’t come with us, so I must account for him some other way.” He reflected inwardly. “I will not leave him unattended, but I must venture into Toroki’s cave myself to do my Emperor’s bidding. Which means I must delegate responsibility for Miramu’s actions to someone else. It is not ideal, and I do not trust the rogue out of my sight. But it is unavoidable in this case. Whilst I will keep my Emperor’s word, I cannot guarantee an assassin will keep his own.”

His gaze ran over the stirring soldiers, and his lips thinned as he made up his mind.

“It will have to be so.” He acknowledged to himself. “Of all the men, Aoiketsu is least likely to be swayed or tricked by Miramu’s deceptions. His patriotic spirit for Kutou is strong, as is his loyalty to the Emperor. And he is an able soldier, should he choose to use his skills. Much as I dislike the thought, I will leave him to mind the Sairou troublemaker. I should like to have him with me — but keeping Miramu to heel is as important when we are not so very far from Eiroku territory.”

He turned his attention to the other young men in his retinue, considering each by turn. Of the six soldiers who had accompanied him to Sairou on this trip, Aoiketsu and Maichu were the youngest, although if he was honest with himself, he felt they were also among the most reliable in the Kutou palace guard. Next there was Kayu, an outspoken, wiry young man of twenty one who was prone to complaining but quick with his sword and deft on his feet in a moment of conflict. Hyoushin’s eyes narrowed slightly as he reflected on Kayu’s progress in the palace retinue. Despite his skill and agility, the young man had never been too keen on taking responsibility for his own mistakes, and it rankled with the Meihi somewhat that a man of arms would be willing to blame his fellows for his own errors in judgement.

“But he is a good soldier, and he does not often err.” He acknowledged, his gaze shifting from the still sleepy Kayu to the next man, who was busy polishing the blade of his sword as if to conceal unease at the mission ahead. Ouno was twenty three, from merchant folk and deeply superstitious, and despite his diligence, Hyoushin immediately discounted him as a potential member of the party to tackle Toroki in her cave.

“Not in the presence of Divine magic.” He decided firmly, as his glance darted over the remaining two warriors. At twenty five and twenty six respectively, Jakou and Bouri were the longest serving members of the palace guard present and both solid, if unimaginative

men of brawny build and forceful, well-practiced swordsmanship. That neither one of them possessed the creative instinct to handle an unpredictable battle situation also counted them out in Hyoushin's mind and he sighed, turning his attention back to the younger members of the party.

"Then it is decided." He reflected out loud, drawing the attention of the nearest soldiers as they scrambled to bring themselves into a more presentable formation.

"Are you talking to yourself again, Ghost of the East?" Miramu's sly tones came from behind him and Hyoushin frowned, suppressing his surprise at the man's sudden appearance.

"No, I am working out the tactics of the day ahead." He said evenly. "I am glad you are up, Miramu. I wish you to confirm the path into the mountains."

"You want me to take you to the door, basically." Miramu snorted, and Hyoushin nodded.

"That is appropriate." He agreed. "The arrangement was that you should not face Toroki. If you lead us to that place, it will not be in breach of your promise from my Emperor."

"Yeah, yeah, all right, I get it." Miramu shrugged. "And your little sheep? What of them?"

Hyoushin's eyes narrowed, but he did not retaliate. Instead he turned his gaze once more towards the soldiers.

"Listen well, all of you." He said in the quiet, even tones that all who served under him recognised as the voice of command. "Ouno, Bouri, Jakou — you will remain here and attend the horses and the bulk of our supplies. We will return here as soon as possible. It is your duty to mind our beasts and to divide and prepare rations for all of us — I am putting great trust in all of you, and am placing Bouri in overall command, as the eldest."

"Yes, sir." The three men saluted, Bouri clearly pleased with the responsibility, while Hyoushin did not miss the flicker of relief that flared in Ouno's often wild brown eyes. He nodded.

"The rest of you will come with me." He said softly. "To Toroki's cave. However..."

He paused, then his gaze rested on Aoiketsu.

"Aoiketsu, I do not wish you to enter the cave with us." He said frankly. "Miramu will guide us there, and you will wait with him for

us to emerge. Maichu and Kayu will accompany me into the cave itself. Is this understood?"

"You think I need a babysitter?" Miramu sounded amused, as Aoiketsu's expression registered surprise at the strange command. Hyoushin nodded.

"Yes, I do. To ensure you do not break the terms either." He said bluntly. "You have caused us enough trouble already, and I will not risk you causing further upset to your fellow Westerners."

He offered Aoiketsu a faint smile.

"I realise I am asking an unpleasant task of you." He added. "Yet I have faith in you to complete it with the minimum amount of fuss. Do you accept my orders, Aoiketsu? Do you understand your duty?"

Aoiketsu hesitated for a second, then nodded, raising his hand in a salute.

"Yes sir." He said softly. "I understand, and I won't let him out of my sight."

"Easier said than done." Miramu snorted, and Hyoushin shot him a dark look.

"Aoiketsu, if he threatens your life, or otherwise compromises your safety or the safety of our party, you are authorised to strike him down." He said coolly.

Aoiketsu's eyes widened with shock, and Miramu chuckled.

"Oh, so if I'm a bad boy, Aoi-kun can kill me, huh?" He queried. "Well. Now that is a frightening proposition!"

"Just because he looks like a pretty boy doesn't mean he doesn't know how to fight back." Maichu defended his friend hotly at this juncture. "So you better keep your mouth shut, Miramu — because he's as good a soldier as any of us, and he'll make you sorry if you don't listen to Hyoushin-sama's words."

"You people..." Miramu shook his head slowly. "All right. I understand. I have no intention of upsetting your little party anyway... but I will submit and allow Aoiketsu to 'mind' me."

"Then it is settled." Hyoushin nodded. "Maichu, Kayu, I will be putting a lot of faith in the both of you to be attentive to potential danger. We do not know what kind of person this Toroki truly is... or whether she is or isn't a danger to us. Either way, what we come here to do is bound to cause her displeasure. Possibly anger. We must be

ready. And most importantly of all — we must not take her life. This your Emperor has promised, and this above all things must be upheld.”

“We’ll be fine, Hyoushin-sama. You can count on us.” Maichu said firmly, and Kayu nodded, his thick tail of hair falling over his shoulder as he did so.

“We’ll do as the Emperor asks.” He agreed. “I don’t really want to kill some girl anyway... she’s not going to be that much of a challenge, against three of us, surely?”

“And what about *me*?” Suiko demanded sulkily, before anyone could respond to Kayu’s words. “What am I going to do? Mean Hyoushin, are you trying to leave me behind?”

“I don’t overly care what you do.” Hyoushin said evenly. “You dislike desert and the mountains are unlikely to be filled with water sources. If you wish to stay here with Bouri and the others, I am sure they will provide you with protection.”

Suiko’s eyes narrowed, and she shook her head.

“You are stupid sometimes too, you know.” She said flatly, flickering her ghostly fingers in the direction of the mountains. “Those peaks are full of underground water repositories and I can feel the flow of it from here. Besides, I don’t want to stay here with these dirty soldiers. I want to come with you to see Toroki.”

“I thought you didn’t care about Byakko?” Hyoushin raised an eyebrow, neatly warding her off as she sought to wrap her arms around his neck once more. Suiko pouted, putting her hands on her hips as she glared at him.

“I don’t know about Toroki. She might be different.” She said petulantly. “She’s not like *him*. Byakko didn’t throw *her* away.”

She thrust her fingers in Miramu’s direction, and Hyoushin definitely saw a flicker of annoyance cross the assassin’s strange indigo eyes. He snorted.

“Take your weird witch with you, Hyoushin.” He said frankly. “She might be helpful, against Toroki’s power.”

“What is Toroki’s power, Miramu?” Aoiketsu wondered. “You’ve met her, and you said that she predicted... things. But is that... all she can do?”

Miramu’s eyes narrowed, and he shook his head.

“Don’t underestimate the power of knowing someone’s past, present and future.” He said darkly, a hint of bitterness in his tones. “Besides, she’s not just a prophet. She’s a Seishi — a Celestial Warrior who embraced her powers and more, one who possesses Byakko’s holy treasure. Or are you ignorant of these things? I’m sure the water witch can tell you all about the power of a Celestial Warrior and how it is increased by proximity to the Shinzahou.”

“I see.” Hyoushin frowned, considering the man’s words carefully. “Then before we set off, I would like you to clarify this for me a little more. Toroki has the power of sight, but she also has other magic, yes?”

“In a sense, yes.”

“In what sense?”

Miramu smiled lazily.

“Don’t let her touch you with her right hand.” He said casually. “At least, if it’s uncovered... you’ll regret it if you do.”

“Why her *right* hand?” Maichu looked flummoxed. “What’s wrong with it? Does she have some kind of weird disease or something?”

“Worse.” Miramu responded. “She has a *curse*. Toroki’s mark appears on the first finger of her right hand, and if she touches you, she will know all your immediate thoughts and feelings. If she takes you off guard, she might even be able to rummage around inside your memories, and even alter your perceptions — but most significantly of all, she draws strength from such contact. And with that strength, she has the ability to manifest psychic energy at her opponents.”

“Psychic... energy?” Ouno murmured, and Hyoushin could tell that the man was relieved not to be going inside the cave.

“Clarify.” He said brusquely. “What do you mean, psychic energy?”

“Imagine being struck by a wave of thoughts and feelings and pictures of things from deep within someone’s soul.” Miramu said softly. “Imagine that your own deepest, darkest thoughts and memories were pulled from within you and flung into the ether, poisoning and tainting those around you with your most traumatic fears and nightmares. Her magic causes delusions, Hyoushin. Delusions of reality, whether through her own eyes or through the eyes of those she makes contact with.”

He smiled slightly.

“Now you understand why I will not see her.” He added. “The more

negative the energy, the more strength she can draw from it, and the greater her arsenal is. With my profession, there is much darkness inside of me. I would be a hindrance to anyone who was foolish enough to bring me into her range. And more, I do not wish to have my thoughts, my memories and my life ransacked by her touch.”

He spread his hands, shooting Hyoushin what could only be described as a malicious smile.

“I wish you luck, Hyoushin-sama.” He murmured.

Hyoushin’s brows knitted together as he carefully considered this.

“If this is the case, it is as well to know that her right hand holds such potential power.” He said eventually. “And we will endeavour to avoid it — and immobilise her before we seek to take the treasure. We will not kill her — but we can render her unable to attack. It is good to have prior warning, Miramu — thank you for your information.”

Miramu seemed startled by this, as if he had expected more of a reaction from his Meihi companion, and Hyoushin turned his attention back to his men, secretly glad that he had been able to respond in such a level, even manner.

“But I too may be a liability for my Emperor’s forces, to enter a cave with an opponent like that awaiting us.” He reflected. “What strength could she draw from my past, I wonder? It would be as well not to find out.”

He paused for a moment, then his gaze flitted to Suiko.

“Perhaps it would be preferable that you accompany us.” He said softly. “It may be that we require a form of fighting which does not require direct personal contact.”

Suiko’s expression changed in an instant from a dark sulk to a radiant beam, and Hyoushin half wondered if he had made the right call.

“Then shall we move out?” Was all he said, however. “Suiko, you may come to the mountains so long as you cease to drape yourself all over me. The Sairou climate is antisocial for all of us and it does not make my progress any easier to have you to take into account as well.”

“Fine. I can walk.” Suiko folded her arms, but her eyes still glittered with excitement. “After all, you want me to come with you, Hyoushin. So you *do* like me after all.”

Hyoushin shot her a look, but decided it was better not to respond,

and instead he gestured to his men to gather their weapons and prepare to part ways.

“We will return as soon as we are able.” He told Bouri, who saluted, nodding his head. “Maichu, Kayu, Aoiketsu — bring only what you need carry — your swords and water for the walk across the land. Miramu, we are following your lead. We wish to take the quickest path to the mountains — the sooner we face Toroki, the sooner we can all return to Kutou.”

“Then follow me.” Miramu said easily. “If you track through the paths I know, we’ll be there in an hour or maybe even less than that.”

“That suits.” Hyoushin agreed. “Let us go.”

So they both came ever closer.

Toroki rested her head in her hands, closing her eyes as she sought to make sense of the dizzy whirl of images that infiltrated her mind. Vague whispers and flickers of thoughts and memories not her own had begun to claw at the edges of her sanity, and she knew beyond all doubt that before too long the men of the East would confront her in the desert chamber.

“But this is how it must be.” She whispered, pulling herself to her feet as she cast a reluctant glance in the direction of the Shinzahou. “I do not know the outcome, or whether it is for good or bad that they come here. But that they must come... that I must meet them face to face. Here, in this cave.”

She glanced up towards the uneven cavern ceiling, pursing her lips as she remembered the day four years ago that she had first taken refuge in the mountains. Although there had been many more convenient openings in the cliff face, several of which were closer to ready streams of fresh mountain water, she had not satisfied herself until she had found this one. Of all of the caverns in the Kanin peaks, this one alone matched the fleeting premises of her vision — that in a cave such as this one she would encounter the forces of the Dragon and the Phoenix in quick succession.

“It has been four years.” She sighed, stretching out on her back as she slipped her fingers beneath her head. “But this day is the day.”

She closed her eyes a second time, focusing her attention on the elusive pictures as she strove to visualise the people she would be facing. As she did so, a little gasp escaped her lips, and her eyes shot open, dismay flickering in their depths.

“Miramu.” She breathed. “After so many years — do you choose today to face me? This is not that day. This day is different. This day... is something else. But even though you seek to hide from me, I know you’re there. I know you’re coming, Miramu, and with you are coming men of the Dragon’s land. Men who seek Suzuno-sama’s divine treasure... the mirror which I swore to defend with my life.”

She fell silent, the images in her head cresting and falling like waves on the seashore as she let her strange, precognitive powers take control of her thoughts.

“I must preserve Byakko’s treasure.” She reflected. “It is the duty he gave me, to protect Suzuno-sama’s mirror with my life. But if today is not that day, then I am not destined to face Miramu. Nor is my death a possibility. In which case... their coming...”

She frowned, pulling herself into a sitting position as she wrapped her arms around her knees, hugging them tightly to her chest.

“They’ve come to take it.” She murmured. “And Byakko forgive me, but I... Toroki... I am going to let them.”

Chapter 9

Chapter Eight

It was nearing midday by the time the group of dusty Kutou travellers reached the steep mountain pathway that led up to one of the most fearsome and imposing peaks in the Kanin mountain range. The sun was climbing high in the sky, for the journey that Miramu had anticipated taking one hour had taken closer to two, and as Maichu reflected on the climb ruefully, he acknowledged to himself that perhaps bringing Suiko along for the ride had not been the Commander's best decision. The mage had walked in relatively cooperative silence for the first ten minutes or so of the trip, but it had not been long before she had begun complaining about the uneven ground and the dry, dusty surface, and on odd occasions when Hyoushin's back had been turned, random springs had spouted up from cracks in the ground. One had almost created a minor avalanche on the unsteady slope of the rocky path, and as a result the petulant guardian had received a sharp scolding, sending her into an even deeper sulk.

"She's like a kid." Maichu decided now. "Proof positive that women should never, ever be brought on missions like this. Bad enough we have Captain Kill-A-Lot with us... it would be much better if it was just the Commander and us soldiers. But I suppose... he knows where it is..."

"We're here." At that moment the assassin halted, turning to face his companions with a flicker of his usual, lazy smile. "Up this path is the opening to Toroki's cave. This is as far as I'm going... and I suppose that means you too, Aoi-kun, doesn't it? We can have a nice little chat about all kinds of things while your big strong Commander goes and steals Byakko's hand mirror."

"You seem to mistake idiocy for wit far too often, Miramu." Hyoushin said, a faintly bored note in his even, Eastern tones. "Aoiketsu, you have my apologies for assigning you such a mission... however we will try not to take too long inside."

"It's all right with me, sir." Aoiketsu's expression was one of determination, and Maichu shot him a rueful grimace.

"Keep an eye on his hands." He told his friend quietly. "That Miramu guy's weird and twisted, and you're way too pretty for your

own safety.”

“Maichu, shut your face.” Aoiketsu glared at him, and Maichu shrugged.

“You never know with guys like that.” He said pragmatically. “You were the one who said he was fixating on your eyes. Just be prepared, okay? Don’t let him do anything he shouldn’t while we’re in that cave.”

“I’m a better soldier than that, you idiot.” Aoiketsu told him scathingly. “And besides, Miramu hates everyone. Me included, most likely. You just worry about your side of things, and don’t let this Toroki dame kill you, okay? I’ll be fine — I can take care of myself.”

“Well, if he causes you any trouble, kill him, like the Commander says.” Maichu said firmly. “Even if it means a whole shitload of blood, Aoi. Even if you puke up an’ pass out... do it. Okay? I’ll carry you back to the camp if necessary — but I’d love to see someone wipe the smug, arrogant smirk off his ugly assassin face.”

Despite himself, Aoiketsu laughed, clapping a hand on his friend’s shoulder as he slowly shook his head.

“It’ll be fine.” He said firmly. “And I’m not as impulsive as you, so that’s probably why I’m playing guard. You’re the one who needs to be more careful.”

“Maybe.” Maichu acknowledged. “The way Miramu ran down her powers made her sound kinda creepy. But it’s okay. She’ll just be one woman I won’t let touch me... how hard can that be?”

“For you, practically impossible.” Aoiketsu bantered. “Especially if she happens to be pretty.”

Maichu snorted.

“And I was worried about you.” He retorted.

“Maichu, Kayu, let us go.” Hyoushin’s words prevented Aoiketsu from replying, and after exchanging grimaces with his friend, Maichu hurried to join his commander, the eager Kayu and the impatient Suiko as they began their ascent up the steep mountain path.

“Commander, do you really think Aoi is all right, left alone with that weirdo?” He asked, as they moved out of earshot, and Hyoushin pursed his lips, slowly nodding his head.

“I believe Aoiketsu is an adequate enough soldier to be able to defend his life, even against a professional killer.” He said at length.

“You should turn your mind to the task ahead, Maichu. It is my job to concern myself with the well-being of my soldiers. Yours is only to do as you are bidden to the best of your ability.”

His expression became sombre.

“After all, if something should go awry, it will be I who takes the responsibility with Kintsusei-sama.” He added.

“It’s not that.” Maichu admitted. “I just don’t want Aoi getting killed. He’s such a baby around blood, even if he is good with his sword.”

“Then it is probably time he stopped being a baby.” Hyoushin reflected. “I have faith in his skill. Besides, the matter is not open for discussion. The decision has been made. Our task is to recover Byakko’s treasure on the Emperor’s behalf.”

“Seiryuu-sama’s power should be enough for the Emperor of Kutou.” Suiko pouted. “He’s cruel, making us come to this horrible dry place like this to search for alien magic.”

“Yet that is our brief, and so we will carry it out.” Hyoushin was unmoved. “If you have complaints, Suiko, you can address them to Kintsusei-sama when we return.”

“Maybe I will.” Suiko folded her arms. “I’m not afraid of him.”

“None of us are afraid of him, you silly woman.” Kayu said sharply. “We respect him, that’s all.”

“We’re Imperial Guard. That’s what we’re trained to do.” Maichu added. Suiko snorted.

“Trained, like dogs or horses.” She murmured.

“Now you sound like Miramu.” Maichu objected. “I thought you didn’t like the way he spoke and thought, Suiko-sama.”

“I don’t.” Suiko bristled, shaking her head decidedly. “He’s dry and dead, like this land. And I’m not like him. He’s Byakko’s rubbish. He’s nothing to do with Seiryuu-sama.”

“You keep saying that.” Hyoushin said thoughtfully. “What do you mean by it, Suiko?”

“By what?” Suiko looked startled.

“Byakko’s rubbish.”

“What I said.” Suiko shrugged, clearly unconcerned. “He left Sairou. He came to Kutou. He pretends to like the Emperor and do

Seiryuu's work but he doesn't belong to the East and I don't like him. Just because he made Byakko discard him, it doesn't mean he should be welcome in Kutou. He's dirty and tainted with blood."

"Well, he is an assassin." Kayu reflected. "Hyoushin-sama, does the Emperor really trust Miramu?"

"As much as you or I, I imagine." Hyoushin said frankly. "It is not a matter of trust, but necessity. Miramu is an unsavoury travel companion for all of us, but there is no questioning his knowledge of Sairou. We have made quicker progress thanks to his company — therefore I feel we can stand to bear it a little longer. Once we return to the East, I imagine his involvement in our business will be at an end."

"Kikei-sama trusts him." Kayu said thoughtfully, and Maichu sent his companion a startled glance.

"That pompous old priest?" He demanded. "What has he to do with a contract killer? I thought he was supposed to be a holy man!"

"You shouldn't speak so casually about one in the Emperor's trust, Maichu." Hyoushin said lightly, and Maichu grimaced, looking rueful.

"Yeah, I know. Sorry, sir. I guess I'm just surprised... that Lord Kikei would be involved with an assassin."

"For the Emperor's business, of course." Kayu said smartly. "Like us, and Hyoushin-sama. For Kintsusei-sama's benefit."

"I suppose." Maichu acknowledged. "I guess you know better than me in that respect. He's the one who sponsored your training in the first place, after all... isn't he?"

Kayu nodded, a sheepish grin touching his lips.

"I guess he's my patron in that respect." He agreed. "I owe a lot to Lord Kikei's kindness."

"As, I am sure, do many other war orphans who benefitted from the kindness of a shrine priest." Hyoushin reflected absently. "I recall that not long after the death of the Shougun, Kikei-sama took time to visit the most devastated parts of the capital, and on occasion distributed food and water on the Emperor's command. These days, he rarely leaves the palace complex — but he was a younger man then, I suppose. I imagine that he sees you, Kayu, as a means by which to continue his wide-ranging work for Kintsusei-sama. Certainly in this case he seems to have been correct in his judgement of Miramu. He has indeed provided us with much needed guidance."

“But he’s still not much cop when it comes to the actual retrieving of this treasure.” Maichu said darkly, as they reached the opening of the cave. “This is it, huh? It doesn’t look like much. If I didn’t know better, I’d say it was an empty cave and that Miramu’d been putting us on.”

“There’s magic in the cave, idiot soldier.” Suiko said disdainfully. “Dirty, dusty, desert magic. I can feel it. It’s nasty. I don’t like it.”

“There is your confirmation, Maichu.” Hyoushin said evenly. “Suiko can sense Byakko’s magic from here. This is indeed the place. Keep in mind what Miramu said of Toroki’s powers, all of you, and be alert. Follow me — we’re going inside.”

Maichu shrugged his shoulders, obediently following his enigmatic commander into the darkness of the cave. Kayu and Suiko were not far on his heels, and as they drew further into the black, Hyoushin pulled some flint from his pocket, striking it against the wall of the cave to generate a flare of light. As he did so, it was clear that the passage had once been more than just a naturally formed rock opening, and Maichu let out a breath of relief as he registered the old, disused torches in sconces along the wall. Hyoushin lit two of them, taking one from its sconce and indicating for Kayu to follow suit. He gestured for his companions to follow him and they obeyed, moving further and further into the belly of the mountain slope. They walked in silence for a while, Maichu finding that his every nerve was straining to hear or see any sign that the cave was inhabited beyond the old, abandoned miner’s lights and the faint burrows in the trackway beneath their feet that told of the carts carrying gems that had been hauled through here some years before.

At first, there was nothing, and glancing across at his leader, Maichu could tell that Hyoushin was just as wary and as alert, his left hand not far from his sword as he led the procession. At intervals, the passage forked or veered off into side pathways, and as they reached each of these openings, the Meihi cast Suiko a quizzical glance, silently asking her which way they should be taking. Since entering the darkness, Suiko seemed to have discarded her petulance somewhat, and she had cooperated, shaking her head solemnly at each and every useless turning.

Maichu dearly wanted to ask his Commander how far they were going to walk into the mountain, and how they would find their way back out, but he knew that to speak now would be to give themselves away to the enemy. His mind flitted back to Aoiketsu and with a wry grimace he realised that perhaps his friend had had the easy task after

all.

“At least he can see Miramu.” He reflected to himself ruefully. “And he knows what to expect from that guy.”

A that moment, Hyoushin halted suddenly, holding up his hand to indicate for them to stop. They did so, Maichu drawing breath sharply as he registered what had caused his leader to halt.

Up ahead, in the entrance to a further chamber stood a woman, and she was watching them intently.

As Maichu ran his gaze over her, he remembered Aoiketsu’s teasing words about Toroki’s prettiness and he bit his lip, acknowledging to himself that in a sinister, creepy kind of way, the young woman who now faced them was attractive. She was not tall, nor was she particularly imposing in her physical form, and yet there was something about her that demanded a second look. Waves of snow white hair framed her face, flowing wild and loose across her shoulders, and she was dressed in the dusty, patched village attire of the West, not unlike the women of the town of Eiroku that they had passed through on their way to the mountains. Her complexion was much like Miramu’s, the olive, gypsyish tone of the West, and somehow this was in strange contrast to the stark shade of her hair. However, it was her eyes that disconcerted Maichu the most, for they seemed to convey more than just simple interest. Indigo blue, like those the assassin also possessed, somehow where Miramu’s eyes had lost soul Toroki’s had gained it, for emotions and colours both swirled up in their depths, making Maichu feel like she was looking right through him to his very core.

And, as he recalled Miramu’s words about Toroki’s power, it was quite possible she was.

He bit his lip, trying not to show how unsettled he was.

“Well.” At length she spoke, breaking the silence. Her voice was edged with the same Western accent as Miramu’s had been, her tones low and musical and somehow conveying much of the emotion that flickered in her strange eyes. “So you have come.”

“Are you Toroki?” Hyoushin asked softly, and Maichu’s impression of his leader went up several notches as he registered the perfect calm in the Meihi’s tones.

Slowly the woman nodded her head.

“I am.” She agreed. “And you are men of the Dragon, come from the East to seize the treasure belonging to Ousugi Suzuno, Byakko no

Miko who saved this land a century ago. Correct?"

"Yes." Hyoushin inclined his head, silver hair falling over his shoulder as he did so. "We've heard much about your prophetic powers, Toroki... I am not surprised that you saw us coming."

"I have waited for you for a long time." Toroki admitted. "Tell me your name, Man of the East."

"Hyoushin of Kutou." Hyoushin said quietly. "We have not come here to harm you. Simply to negotiate with you about the Shinzahou you protect."

"I am Byakko's chosen Seishi, born to guard Suzuno-sama's mirror." Toroki raised her strange eyes, meeting the Commander's gaze straight on with a mournful look, almost as if she regretted the words she spoke and Maichu wondered if she was quite sane. "I must protect that treasure with my life."

"We have orders from Kutou's Emperor, which cannot be gainsaid." Hyoushin said evenly. "We do not seek to take the mirror by force, Toroki, but we will not leave here without it."

"Yes. I knew that would be your answer." Toroki sighed, and Maichu saw her run her left hand along her right arm, slipping her slender fingers beneath the black fabric that cloaked her right hand from view as she slid the cloth away from her skin. "I knew you would stand there and say such things to me. The East has great ambitions, I know this. But this is not a concern of mine. I am from Sairou... and I do not look to fight with you either. Byakko's treasure belongs to the West... yet you seek to steal it?"

"We have come merely to recover it for our Emperor." Hyoushin's eyes narrowed at the baring of her right hand, and in the dim light of the cave Maichu was sure he saw something white glittering against the skin of her index finger. At his gaze, Toroki nodded, holding up her hand so that her character was clearly visible.

"I am Toroki." She repeated. "Byakko has invested trust in me which I must honour."

Her eyes narrowed, as she ran her gaze over each member of the party once more.

"I hear it." She whispered. "I see it in your faces. The things to come... for the East. If they persist... one of you will lie dead, slain by a brother and a man you consider friend. Betrayal will fall upon your Emperor's head, and destruction will come from the Dragon's mouth. These things... I see them all. You who stand before me... your

Emperor, betrayed by one born of the blood of a suppressed tribe, and Suzuno-sama's treasure... stained with the blood of this world."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Kayu demanded, clearly unnerved, and Maichu found he was scarcely less so, as he stared at her in horror. Toroki shrugged.

"I don't know, yet." She admitted. "What I say makes no sense... not even to me. When you have gone, maybe then... I will know the answer to your questions. But for now..."

She hesitated, flexing her fingers.

"I will not prevent you from taking the Shinzahoo." She added. "Such a thing I cannot stop from happening. I knew you would come and relieve me of it. However, I must still defend it. Byakko has charged me to fight and I must fight. Even though it is a battle I must lose."

"Your words make little sense indeed." Hyoushin said frankly, and Maichu was surprised to hear a faint flicker of something else in his Commander's tones. With a jolt, he wondered if his pragmatic, down to earth leader had been rattled by Toroki's words about tribal betrayal. However, Hyoushin's eyes were fixed on the exposed white character of Toroki, and Maichu realised that the Meihi was far more concerned with Miramu's description of Toroki's latent magic.

"You fear me, Hyoushin of Kutou?" The woman seemed to realise this, for she took a step towards him, tilting her head on one side. "Perhaps you should. You have many things you hide... and even I cannot see what they all are. You are an enigma even to your fellow man — a stranger to me, yet one I've seen before. I do not understand how this is — but I know you. Hyoushin of Kutou — such a name means nothing to me. But I know you. And our paths will cross again."

Her eyes narrowed, as she reached out her finger towards the Meihi commander.

"Perhaps I can see more clearly who you are." She murmured. "Hyoushin..."

"Leave the Commander alone!" Kayu reacted impulsively, pushing the girl back as her hand came close to brushing Hyoushin's scarred cheek, and Toroki stumbled, her character making contact with Kayu's skin instead. Kayu let out an exclamation, pulling away as he glared at her, and Maichu was once more unnerved by the sudden unearthly look in her eyes.

"May Byakko have mercy on your soul, Hei Kayu." She murmured,

and at the sound of his name Kayu faltered, staring at her in alarm.

“What did you say?” He demanded. “What are you talking about? You have no business knowing my name or prying into my head!”

Toroki’s eyes narrowed, and she cast Maichu an interested look.

“And you are Shi Maichu.” She murmured, and Maichu felt a cold chill run down his spine. “Yet you come here, stand before me... together... like this. Unfortunate...”

“Stop this now.” Hyoushin cast Kayu a glance, then drew his sword, holding it out to divide the soldiers from the strange young woman who stood before them, eyes gleaming, like the predatorial cat she represented. “You have said you cannot prevent us taking Suzunosama’s treasure. Our need is greater than yours. Kutou has a purpose for which the Shinzahou is necessary. If you are aware of this — if you are aware of the reasons for our coming, it is foolish to stand against us, or to torment my men in such a manner with your witchcraft. If you realise it is hopeless, step aside.”

“Will you kill me, Hyoushin of Kutou?” Toroki asked softly. Hyoushin’s eyes narrowed, and Toroki smiled.

“You have entered into bond with the devil to spare my life.” She whispered. “So another might take it, one day, when I am less defended than I am now. You have promised not to kill me, but the truth is, you cannot. No matter what you do with your fine silver blade and your cold amethyst eyes, you cannot kill Toroki. Today is not that day.”

“You sound as twisted as Miramu.” Maichu told her frankly, and to his surprise, Toroki’s eyes widened at his words.

“Miramu.” She murmured. “So I was right. He came this far, but he chooses not to face me.”

“Miramu told us that you had the power to read people’s thoughts, and see their futures and their pasts.” Hyoushin said quietly, still holding his weapon out as if to create a barrier between them. “And that from the resulting energy you unleash madness on those around you. If this is the case, and it is through this power that you knew of our coming, why must you stall us in this way?”

“Because I must do my duty by Byakko.” Toroki said sadly. “Your being here is painful for me. I can see and hear whispers of your lives, flashing and flooding over me as you stand before me. I do not relish this encounter, Hyoushin of Kutou. It is not nice to be haunted by the futures of strangers. And you...”

Her eyes narrowed.

“I cannot understand why.” She murmured. “But I feel sure we will meet again.”

“Once we have the treasure, we will not linger in Sairou, so I imagine you are mistaken.” Hyoushin said evenly. “But if we cannot talk you into rescinding it, we must take some other course. Suiko, if you please.”

Suiko pushed back her cloak, bringing her hands together and Maichu heard the sudden sound of rushing water, pouring through the underground chambers as it made new pathways up towards Toroki’s cave. The mage spread her hands, as the floor beneath their feet divided and a sudden flare of mountain water shot upwards like a spring. Suiko’s eyes narrowed, and she pushed her hands out in Toroki’s direction.

“You’re a pain. And you’re boring.” She said firmly. “And you’re annoying Hyoushin. Besides, you really need a bath!”

As soon as the words left her mouth, the swell of water struck Toroki full on, knocking her back into the cave beyond and as her head struck the hard stone, she slumped, unconscious. Hyoushin’s eyes narrowed as he glanced at her still form, then he held up his hand, indicating for Suiko to desist.

“Enough.” He murmured. “She will cause us no further trouble, but we are bound not to kill her.”

“She’s creepy.” Maichu shivered as they stepped past her still form and into the cave beyond. “That she just knew our names like that. And what did she mean, about the Emperor and... all of that stuff?”

“I do not pretend to understand the delusions of mad women.” Hyoushin said evenly. “And she was quite clearly insane. Whether or not her power of precognition is as strong as Miramu indicated, I don’t know. Certainly she was able to draw your names, so she must have some latent ability. Yet she did not seek to attack us with the magic that assassin claimed she had. Perhaps he exaggerated... and more than likely her words were intended simply to unnerve us.”

“She wanted you to run away.” Suiko said scornfully. “Silly. As if Hyoushin would run away from a woman.”

“Quite.” Hyoushin’s lips twitched into a faint smile. “Especially when on my Emperor’s business.”

“You think she was making it up? All that stuff?” Kayu asked

uncertainly. "Why do you think she asked Byakko... to grant me mercy? What was that?"

"A scare tactic." Hyoushin said evenly. "She drew your name from you to frighten you, that's all. As Suiko said, she hoped we would leave of our own accord."

"Is this what we're looking for?" Maichu paused beside the glittering green-backed mirror, reaching out a hesitant finger to touch its shining surface. "Commander? It is a hand-mirror, this Shinzahou?"

"Yes." Hyoushin nodded his head, scooping the mirror up and glancing at it. "Suiko, you are more adept with magic than the rest of us. Is it from this place that you felt Byakko's magic so keenly?"

"That stupid mirror is Byakko no Miko's Shinzahou, if that's what you mean." Suiko nodded. "It's ugly... I don't like it. But that's what it is."

"Then that's what we came for." Hyoushin seemed relieved, slipping the mirror into the cloth bag he had brought, and nodding. "And we should return to camp. That was more simple than I imagined it would be... the Emperor will be most pleased when I make report to him. Miramu's advice seems so far to have been borne out... perhaps, after all, there is some justification for Kikei-sama's trusting him."

"Kikei-sama has good judgement." Kayu agreed. "Even if Miramu is a murderer, I guess he tells the truth."

So it would seem. "Hyoushin nodded." Kayu, I do not want you to dwell on anything that that girl said. You either, Maichu. We will not discuss it among the others — I will report it to the Emperor if need be, but I do not wish to create fear, especially with those of your comrades who have more superstition than we. And as for what was said about Byakko, Kayu, you can take comfort in the fact you are a man of Seiryuu, and that your patron is Seiryuu's most senior living priest. I am sure that you have nothing to fear from Sairou's tiger."

"I guess not." Kayu laughed ruefully. "When you put it like that. I guess she was trying to just scare us."

"We won't tell the others." Maichu agreed. "If that's what you think is better."

"I see no need to generate unnecessary speculation." Hyoushin said evenly. "We have more important things to do. Such as locating and retrieving Byakko's relic, before returning to Kintsusei-sama in the East."

He cast a last glance back at Toroki's unconscious form.

"She really did not fight us." He murmured. "But in the end, we have what we came to retrieve, so so much to the better. We have not drawn blood, and we have kept the Emperor's word. She will recover, after all... and likely she will not come around until we are long gone from this place."

"Then lets go back and relieve Aoi of his babysitting duty." Maichu murmured. "Mission accomplished!"

"At last."

Shishi glanced at her reflection in the mirror, casting herself a rueful grimace as she rested her elbows on the unit before her. "I feel like I've wasted far too much of everyone's time... it really sucks, having been stuck here like this for almost two whole days."

"That's not really the way to thank Anara-san for her hospitality, you know." Hikari scolded, leaning up against the wall as she folded her arms across her chest. "Don't say things like that when she's here — okay? We're all impatient to go, but at least thanks to the map she's sketched, we should be able to catch up with ourselves and find Toroki's cave more easily. Mustn't we?"

"Yes, I suppose so." Shishi frowned. "It's just a pain. I didn't even think that a whack like that could've laid me up for so long as it did — I guess it was harder than I thought. Bastard drunkards! If we had time I'd like to go back and show them what I think of them! But as it is..."

"As it is, there ain't gonna be any suicide missions on this trip." Jin's voice cut across her, as the young bandit strode into the room, Anara's map clutched in his hands. "Well? Are you ready? I swear since Hikari came to this world, Shishi, you've taken longer an' longer to get up an' far more time lookin' in the mirror than you did before. Are you goin' to turn into a proper girl on me?"

"Shut your face, idiot." Shishi flushed, turning to glare at him angrily. "Of course not! And I'm ready. Stop complaining. We can go any time — we were just waiting for you!"

"There's nothing wrong with being a proper girl, either." Hikari objected. "It's not a disease, Jin."

"I ain't gonna win this, am I?" Jin said ruefully, holding up his hands. "Fine, I get it. I give. Now come on, the both of you. Girls or not, we've got to get movin'. Accordin' to Anara-san's map, there's a

town not far from here... by the name of Eiroku. It's on a direct route into the mountains, but we're goin' to have to be on our guard if we take that path. Apparently the people are kinda prickly an' it's full of the bandit types you've already fallen foul of once. More to the point..."

He hesitated, then he frowned, shaking his head.

"Anara-san's husband told me that there are all sorts of stories buzzin' in Eiroku." He said softly. "He'd been there, makin' some kind of delivery or trade — I don't know what exactly. But apparently the whole town is alive with talkin'. Some strangers were there a few days back, an' one of them was a witch who replenished the dry well in the town centre. Geiyo-san didn't seem too clear on details — but the strangers weren't from Sairou. That seems clear. The only thing I can think of is..."

"That they came from Kutou?" Shishi's eyes widened. "Shit, Jin, you're kidding? They reached Eiroku already?"

"A witch who replenished the well?" Hikari looked startled. "What do you mean?"

"What I said." Jin shrugged. "Apparently she looked like nothing on this earth — some kind of demon, or witch, or something like that. But she had power over water, and she brought a miracle to a town which has scabbled for water for a long, long time. Everyone's talking about it."

"And because of that, we think Kutou's people have been there?" Hikari frowned. "Why?"

"Because Seiryuu is a *water* dragon, stupid." Shishi clenched her fists angrily. "Water's the damn element of the Eastern God... an' we know they have their stupid Shinzahou. It's not that big a jump in understanding — don't be slow, Hiki."

"Hey, I don't know as much about all of this as you do!" Hikari defended herself. "All I really know about this God of Kutou's is that it's some kind of dragon — give me a break!"

"That's not really important." Jin said briskly, before Shishi could retaliate. "The bottom line is, it probably was Kutou's lot. And they must know something about Toroki's whereabouts too. It's too much of a coincidence otherwise."

"Jin's right." Shishi sighed. "Shit, I'm really sorry. I've messed up badly, haven't I?"

“Hey, your health is more important. I told you that.” Jin sent her an easy grin. “We’ll just have to step on it and hope they haven’t got the insider knowledge we now have. The odds that they do aren’t that great — for all we know they’re still scouring the mountains. And there’s a lot of mountain to scour. Besides, Shishi, you and I have lived most our lives on mountains. We know the way to tackle them and what to look for. It ain’t over yet... so don’t look like that. It doesn’t suit you.”

“Is Eiroku the quickest route?” Hikari asked quizzically, and Jin shook his head.

“No, but if we take the direct path, it means we’ll probably be camping out somewhere in the desert.” He replied. “Or at the edge of the mountains... either going or coming back.”

“I say we risk the desert.” Hikari said determinedly.

“Hiki?” Shishi shot her a doubtful look. “Are you sure about that? With Kutou’s people sniffing around? For all we know, that bastard assassin might be with them.”

“I think so.” Hikari nodded. “It’s all we can do to catch up to them now... we have to take a few risks. Besides, if they’re already in the mountains, it won’t be a problem. Will it?”

“Hikari’s probably right.” Jin pursed his lips. “Okay. Then that’s what we’ll do. We’ll cut past Eiroku and head into the desert. But it’ll be a hard walk, Hikari, and I won’t be able to help you over the roughest bits if I’m carrying supplies. Okay?”

“I’ll cope.” Hikari assured him. “This is important. We can’t waste any more time.”

“You’re leaving, then?” Anara’s voice came from the doorway, and the trio turned, seeing their host watching them, a smile on her face. “Shishi-chan, you look much better — I’m glad to see it.”

“I’m fine, now. Just annoyed at having been such a bother for everyone.” Shishi admitted.

“Thank you for everything you’ve done for us, Anara-san.” Jin added. “And for the map especially. I guess it ain’t easy to do, huh? Giving away information like this to strangers.”

“No... but I think... you’re good people.” Anara sighed, shrugging her shoulders. “The truth is, events have made me suspicious too easily. Too much bad has happened and it’s hard to balance it with the good. Besides, Myoume... when she left, I knew... she felt that I

wouldn't miss her being there. That she felt she was a burden to me and... in some ways, I suppose she was. Because of it, she thought I loved her less than I had her poor brother, which was never the case at all. But she was... not really my Myoume, when she left here. I did not like — I have never liked Toroki at all. But... Toroki was a part of Myoume, and so I tried my best to accept that, as a mother."

She glanced at her hands.

"If Myoume is still a part of Toroki, I'd be glad to know it." She murmured. "If you can take that cursed mirror and free my little girl from her sentence. No matter what wrath Byakko throws down on my head, I'll bear it — if only my daughter didn't have to suffer in such a terrible way any more."

"We'll do our best." Hikari said softly. "I promise, Anara-san. It's the least we can do, for all the help you've given us."

"And with that, we really ought to get going." Jin added. He bowed his head in Anara's direction, then, "Take care, Anara-san. If we pass this way again, we'll be sure to stop to say hello... and hopefully, to bring news of your daughter."

"I would like that very much." Anara's smile returned at this, and she nodded. "Suzaku's people have a reputation for being full of heart... I'm glad that the rumours were true ones. I wish you luck, all of you. And safe passage to the Kanin peaks."

It was with these words still ringing in their ears that the three travellers set off once more on their quest, leaving the village far behind them as they set forward with renewed purpose.

"It's really kinda sad." Hikari reflected, as they passed through a particularly tricky section of the rocky path. "Anara-san, I mean... and this Toroki girl we're going to see. I guess I never thought about it like that before... that being a Celestial Warrior can possibly alienate you from everything else. I mean, Chichiri and Tasuki aren't that way, and nor is Dad. But then I guess Dad's abandoned all of his Seishi roots now, pretty much — hasn't he?"

"I guess so." Shishi looked uncharacteristically thoughtful. "I don't really know about Papa... Kashira and Chichiri. I mean, I didn't know that Chichiri's family had died until you mentioned it — maybe there are other things I don't know about him too. But I can't imagine Papa... Kashira has that many secrets in his closet."

"Kashira's a pretty open kind of guy." Jin agreed. "But I suppose they did lose friends, didn't they? That's pretty shitty, when you come

down to it... havin' to bury people you're close to. Kashira's always said that his bein' a Seishi is somethin' to do with the stars an' this world, so he's always Tasuki, no matter whether he's Genrou or he ain't. I don't know if even he totally knew what he meant — I sure as hell didn't. Not really. But maybe what he was sayin' is that Genrou has a life an' a family an' all that shit. But if Suzaku calls, Tasuki has t'drop everythin' and snap to attention. Maybe that's it. That in the end, a Seishi has to sacrifice everything to serve the Beast God."

"And if they don't, they end up screwed. Like Kutou." Shishi said bluntly. "That Nakago creep who caused the last war was like that — Chichiri said as much, didn't he? That they followed their own ends, and got distracted."

"I suppose this Toroki must be a strong person." Hikari reflected. "To leave her family, and give up her normal life to accept her duty."

"She can't be too much older'n us, either." Jin agreed pensively. "Because I wouldn't've said Anara-san was much older'n Chichiri-san, if she even is. An' Chichiri-san married Aidou-sama late, really."

"I guess she takes being Toroki pretty seriously. Taiitsukun was right, saying she'd be hard to negotiate with." Hikari kicked absently at a stone, watching as it rolled off the path and into a dip. "What if she really doesn't want us to have it?"

"We'll just have to see what we can do." Shishi responded. "An' hope we can sweet talk her somehow."

"I've been thinkin' more about the other one." Jin admitted, and Hikari shot him a surprised look.

"Jin?"

"Ame... furi?" Jin's brows furrowed. "Was that the name?"

"Yes." Hikari agreed. "What about him?"

"Well, we don't know where he is. Only that we're not to try and antagonise him." Jin replied. "But takin' Byakko's treasure... won't that piss him off some?"

"Taiitsukun said he'd abandoned Byakko's path completely. I doubt he'll care, and we're not going looking for him." Hikari shrugged. "Toroki is the one we're concerned with, Jin. Don't let's worry about people we're probably never going to meet."

"Hiki's right." Shishi nodded. "Kutou's lot are more realistic a threat to us than some Westerner who we have nothing to do with. Focus, huh? You're gettin' off the point."

"I suppose I am." Jin brushed his fingers absently against the hilt of his sword. "All right. I jus' take protectin' the two of you pretty seriously, that's all. Especially since what happened in Hengei, which was supposed to be pretty peaceful a town to stop in. We know nothing about Amefuri an' it bugs me that we don't."

"But since we're not looking for him, and he doesn't know who we are, the chances of it being an issue are remote." Hikari reflected.

"On a more important note, Hiki, can you feel this Shinzahou thing yet?" Shishi eyed her friend questioningly, and Hikari shook her head, frustration flickering in her hazel eyes.

"I was sure that the closer we got, I'd be able to. I felt the Seiryuu one so strongly." She said helplessly. "It was like it called out to me... like I couldn't miss it, no matter what I did. But we're heading on a direct path to Toroki's cave now. And I don't feel any different. I guess maybe my powers do only work when I'm near to Tasuki or Chichiri. Maybe it's mostly Chichiri's spiritual powers that did it, anyway. Perhaps I don't have that much spiritual power myself after all... it wouldn't surprise me."

"Are you being pessimistic again?" Jin shot her a glance, and Hikari flushed.

"Sorry. I guess I am." She admitted. "I'll stop now. I just want to be more use to you guys. That's all."

"You're fine. Don't worry about it." Jin assured her. "After all, you didn't pick up on the Seiryuu one till you were in Makan... right? We haven't reached the mountains yet. We might not do so tonight, in fact... looking at the sky, I think it must be getting on for evening as it is. We can keep moving till it's dark, and I think we'll reach the first lie of the mountain territory by then, so I reckon there'll be a cave or something we can camp in."

Shishi's eyes narrowed, as she scanned around the landscape.

"I guess a cave would be best." She murmured. "If we can. I think we'd be puttin' ourselves at risk if we tried to camp outside anyplace."

"That goes without saying." Hikari frowned. "Why so emphatic?"

Shishi gestured across the ground to a series of tracks, and Jin's brows knitted together.

"Horses." He murmured. "So there must be a path that's suitable for mounted men after all. And judging from the direction, I guess it's from Eiroku. Considering the position of the sun, and where we are,

that'd fit. Dammit. We don't know if it's Kutou's men or if it ain't — but it could just as easily be mountain bandits, if such things exist in Sairou. An' they ain't our bandits, Shishi... they ain't our people an' we don't know their ways. Even a mountain cave might be dangerous."

"How far into the mountains is Toroki's cave?" Hikari asked softly. Jin shrugged.

"It's a coupl'a hours walk through the range." He said. "At least, that's my estimate from the map. It might be more — dependin' on the paths."

"And it'll be dark before we get to that point." Shishi sighed. "We can't scale a strange set of mountains in the dark, dammit. I guess we'll jus' have to pick somewhere sheltered an' hope for the best."

"Or I'll stop up and keep watch." Jin said grimly.

"You need to sleep too." Hikari objected, but Jin shook his head.

"S'my duty." He said briskly. "Besides, it won't be the first time I've been sentry. One night won't hurt me, an' I'm sure once we get the Shinzahou, I'll get all the sleep I need. Besides, Shishi's better but it ain't a good idea for her to push herself too far after her injury. An' I wouldn't ask you to do it, Hikari — we're here to protect you, not the other way around, an' even if you have Hotohori-sama's *shinken*, you ain't got a clue how to use it."

"You always haveta play the tough guy, huh?" Shishi shot him an amused glance. "Protectin' Suzaku's Shinzahou is top of your priority list, ain't it?"

"I'm protecting the both of you, you ape." Jin retorted, sending her a dark look, and Shishi smirked, shaking her head.

"Yeah, I'm sure you are." She agreed ambiguously. "Very carefully, too."

"Shishi!"

"Relax. If you feel that way, I ain't gonna argue with you." Shishi shrugged. "I mean, I feel pretty okay, but maybe you're right. I ain't gonna cause another hold up, so for once I'll let you have your way."

"Shishi doesn't argue... I guess she must still be convalescent." Hikari laughed, and Shishi sent her a dark look.

"Hey!" She protested. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"If you don't know, it's too late to fix it." Jin quipped, amusement

in his dark eyes.

“Stop wisecracking at my expense and give me the map a second, will you?” Shishi retorted, holding out her hand for the parchment and Jin shrugged, obediently handing it over.

“What are you looking for, Shi-chan?” He asked curiously, as the redhead unfolded it, running her gaze over the inked track that Anara had carefully sketched. At length she glanced up.

“If we take a step or two off the path here, there’s the remains of a mining village just over this rise.” She said softly. “There aren’t any mines in this area now, right? They’ve been exhausted... right?”

“Well, they don’t smuggle over the border any more, so I guess so. At least in this area of the mountains.” Jin nodded. “You think we should make camp there for the night, then?”

“It’s not far off the path, and if it’s a village, there might be shelter.” Shishi nodded. “It’s startin’ to get dark, an’ we’re not going to get into the mountains before it does. P... Kashira always says mountains are illusions. That they ain’t ever as close as you think they are. Better we camp somewhere there’s shelter rather than risk it... besides, the horse tracks don’t go in that direction. If it was bandits or if it was Kutou’s idiots, they ain’t been there.”

“I suppose you’re not so out of it after all.” Jin flashed her a grin. “Hikari, you agree?”

“It sounds sensible to me.” Hikari nodded. “Just over the rise? It’s really not far out of our original path, and if we ration out our supplies and sleep, we can leave first thing in the morning. I doubt that Kutou’s people will be in the peaks overnight either — we won’t be losing time.”

“Then it’s settled.” Jin agreed. “Good thinking, Shishi.”

“I’m not an idiot, you know.” Came the indignant response. “I’m Kashira’s blood, don’t forget. I ain’t a complete simpleton when it comes to survivin’ on my wits.”

With that she stalked off in the direction she had indicated on the map, and Hikari and Jin exchanged looks.

“She feels to blame for the delay pretty badly, huh?” Hikari mused. Jin nodded.

“Shishi for you.” He agreed. “It ain’t like her to be ill, and I’m sure she’s fine now, thanks to Anara-san. But she’s pissed that she’s held us up — now she’s gonna try twice as hard to prove herself useful.”

“Still, this village sounds like a good idea.” Hikari reflected. “The desert is meant to be cold at night... and it would be nice to have shelter.”

“Then we shouldn’t let her get too far ahead of us.” Jin responded. “Before her idiocy gets us all into trouble again.”

“Jin, have you and Shishi honestly not had a fight since we left Kounan?” Hikari sent him a confused look. “Because sometimes you seem as you normally are. And sometimes you seem... annoyed with her. She gives you the funniest looks, too — especially when you say things to me. Is it me she’s mad at? I don’t get it — it doesn’t seem like either of you are cross with me. But I am confused.”

Much to Hikari’s surprise, colour flushed Jin’s cheeks and he shook his head, clearly discomfited by her question.

“I ain’t got a clue what you mean.” He said at length. “Maybe the desert’s gettin’ to you now — causin’ you to imagine things.”

“No... and I’m not imagining the fact you’ve gone bright red, either.” Hikari grabbed him by the arms, meeting his gaze head on. “I want to know, Jin. You’re both my friends and I need to know if something’s up. After all, right now I feel out of some kind of loop... and I don’t like it.”

Jin sighed, running his fingers through his hair as he did so, inadvertently loosening the band that held it in place and as it fell free and unfettered around his shoulders, Hikari stared at him in disbelief.

“You’re hair is longer than mine, almost!” She exclaimed. “If you came to my school looking like that, the principal’d hoick you into the office... why is it all the guys in this world have hair as long as the women, anyway?”

“Hikari?” Jin sent her a confused look, a flicker of relief in his eyes as he spied a change in subject, and at the sight of it Hikari shook her head, meeting his gaze with a serious one of her own.

“No... seriously.” She said quietly. “If something is wrong — Jin, tell me. Please. If I’ve done something — or Shishi has... or whatever it is... we’re friends, right? Something’s been bothering you the whole trip — and it happened again just a while ago, when Shishi ribbed you about protecting me. You didn’t take anything so seriously as that in Hokkan — is it just because you’re in charge? Or is it something else? Don’t you... like being my guardian?”

Jin eyed her for a moment, then he murmured a curse, shaking his head.

“It ain’t like that.” He said quietly, and Hikari was taken aback by the solemnity in his dark eyes. “To tell you the truth, I don’t think I’m protecting Suzaku’s Shinzahou at all. Not really.”

“Not protecting...” Hikari’s eyes widened. “But...?”

“I don’t think of you as the Shinzahou.” Jin admitted. “I think of you as Hikari. That’s who I’m protecting. Hikari.”

“I don’t understand.” Hikari looked confused, and Jin sighed, fumbling with his hairtie as he pulled his thick mane back into its customary band.

“I’m a bandit. I’ve been that since Kashira took me in, and I’ll be it till I die.” He said softly. “That’s all I am, even if I am damn good at it. I ain’t Kashira. I ain’t Chichiri-san. I ain’t any kind of Celestial Warrior and I don’t have the right to... to protect somethin’ like a Shinzahou. I ain’t important enough for that.”

“Don’t be stupid.” Hikari snorted. “It’s nothing like that — and it’s not like I’m much use as a Shinzahou anyway!”

“You’re wrong.” Jin shook his head. “You protected Chichiri-san in Mekan. You helped save Meikyo from Miramu. Whether it’s you or Suzaku inside of you, if you weren’t the Shinzahou, you’d not have been able to do those things. You’re blessed, Hikari-chan — and that’s what makes it difficult for me. So it’s easier... I’d rather protect you like I protect Shishi. As Hikari. Nothing else. If that’s okay with you.”

“Sure.” Hikari looked surprised. “If that’s how you feel. But you’re being silly.”

“Maybe I am.” Jin’s gaze flitted to the mountains as he bit his lip, and Hikari saw him fighting something out inside himself. He shrugged.

“Kashira told me to kick it before it got a good hard hold of me, and he was right.” He murmured. “But I think... he was too late. And that bothers me just as much, in some ways. That right now — that on this journey — I ain’t completely myself.”

“Jin?” Hikari’s brow furrowed in bewilderment. “Who are you then?”

“No... I don’t mean like that.” Jin met her gaze once more, offering her a sheepish smile. “Never mind. It doesn’t matter... and Shishi’s gonna be wondering where we are at this rate.”

“So we’ll walk and talk.” Hikari slipped her arm into his, pulling him in the direction the redhead had gone. “Okay?”

“There’s not much to talk about, you know.”

“I think there is.” Hikari said firmly. “And I’m stubborn, like Shishi is. Besides, we’re friends, right? And whatever it is that’s bugging you, Shishi obviously knows all about it. Otherwise why’d you keep giving her dark looks? If it’s just about me being Shinzahou, you can forget that — I’m no more special than anyone else, and twice as useless in a conflict situation. But if it’s something else... Jin... tell me, okay? Please?”

Jin faltered, then he met her gaze head on, slowly nodding his head.

“All right.” He said softly. “The truth is, Hikari... I... I ain’t seein’ you as I see Shishi. I mean... I am lookin’ out for the both of you. But Shishi... is my sister. At least, that’s how it always seems. You... you ain’t that. I don’t even know when it began, or how... not really. But you ain’t like a sister to me. You... you’re somethin’ else.”

He glanced down, colour touching his cheeks again as Hikari’s eyes widened with sudden comprehension.

“You’ve become somethin’ more to me than that.” He whispered. “An’ it’s awkward. Stupid. Impossible. You don’t belong in this world, even... an’ so I’m tryin’ to do as Kashira told me. But it ain’t so easy as that.”

“Jin...” Hikari swallowed hard, and the bandit glanced at her, shaking his head as he brought his finger up to her lips.

“Whatever you want to say, don’t.” He murmured. “Whatever it is, I don’t need to hear it. I told you. It’s impossible. You come from that world, an’ I come from this. An’ Kashira’s said how messy that is — how it was for your folks, an’ all. I won’t screw about with things so badly, not for you or for me. So I don’t want you to say anythin’, or to discuss it with you again. Shishi knows about it, damn her — I wish she didn’t, cos she’s hot keen on teasin’ me. But now you know... why she is. She... we... that’s why I’m takin’ your safety so seriously, I suppose. But I stopped protecting you as Suzaku’s treasure a long time ago. I protect you as Hikari, because Hikari is the thing that’s important to me. That’s all.”

Hikari bit her lip, her mind whirling as she absorbed the sincerity in her companion’s tones.

“I guess... I understand.” She said at length. “I...”

“That’s enough.” Jin smiled. “No more. Okay? No more. We have a lion cub to catch up to, and she’ll come screaming after us if we don’t

find her. We'll make camp in the village for the night, and tomorrow we'll head for the mountains. Finding Toroki and the Shinzahou is the most important thing... nothing else is. Okay?"

Hikari was silent for a moment, digesting this. Then, slowly, she nodded her head.

"If that's how you feel." She agreed quietly. "All right. Then that's what we'll do."

Relief flooded Jin's face as he realised the subject was over, and he shot her a warm grin.

"Thank you for understanding how it is." He said softly. "Come on. I think I see the roofs of abandoned houses just ahead of us... we should settle, make what kind of a meal we can with the stuff we got from Anara-san's village... and rest. Tomorrow will be a busy day."

"I suppose it will." Hikari returned the smile with a faint one of her own. "All right then. The village it is — let's go."

Chapter 10

Chapter Nine

“It seems like you had relatively little difficulty, then, in retrieving the Tiger’s treasure.”

As the group of soldiers, mage in tow, descended the mountain path, Miramu stood at the foot, his arms folded across his chest as he cast them an amused glance. “Toroki was no trouble for you, then? She didn’t cast any of you down into insanity? I suppose that must be down to your charms, Hyoushin.”

“We have retrieved the treasure.” Hyoushin said evenly. “Where is Aoiketsu? We need to get back to camp as soon as we can, and I will not tolerate further delay in this dry, hot region.”

“I’m here, Hyoushin-sama.” Aoiketsu emerged from behind a jagged twist of rock and from the fed up look on his face, it was clear that he was glad to see his companions returned. “Did you manage to get it? It seems like ages since you went up there, but I guess it isn’t, huh?”

“It seems like ages to me too.” Maichu said fervently. “But we got it. So now we can go — right?”

“No... we can’t.” Hyoushin’s eyes narrowed. “Our business in Sairou is not over yet. However, we will return to the watering hole and relieve Bouri and the others. We have done enough for today, and tomorrow we can look to other things.”

“What do you mean, sir?” Aoiketsu looked startled. “You did get the Shinzahou, right?”

“Yes, we did.” Hyoushin agreed. “But it is only half of our task here. We also have to retrieve the holy relic associated with Sairou’s tiger... just as you and Maichu retrieved the sacred scale of Seiryuu and enabled us to revive Suiko.”

He cast the mage a doubtful look at this juncture, then,

“Miramu, is this something of which you also have direct knowledge? Since your locating of this treasure was indeed correct, I would like to know if you are aware of more.”

“I know some things.” Miramu agreed vaguely. “Let us walk back to the camp... it’s dusty and dry here for your poor sheep, and Suiko

might dry up if she's not careful. We wouldn't want that, would we?"

"Shut up, stupid." Suiko snapped back at him. "Unless you want me to make you very, very wet indeed. Or don't you know that your body has water inside of it, assassin? Would you like it if I made all of that explode out of you like a giant fountain? Don't speak so casually to one blessed by the power of Seiryuu-kami-sama!"

"Calm down, the both of you." Hyoushin raised his hands. "Suiko, we will not harm Miramu. Odious as he might be, you must ignore his antagonism. He is useful to us at present."

"I don't see how." Suiko pouted, but she folded her arms across her chest. "Fine. But he better be careful."

"It would be much more helpful to all of us if you tried to keep your temper a little more in check, also." Hyoushin added. "You were not so petulant as this within the Shrine at the palace, Suiko, and even though I realise you are in a strange land with an alien climate, this is something we all must suffer. It is trying to all of us to hear you complain constantly about things we cannot help."

"I can't help it either." Suiko said defensively. "I'm strongest when I'm near to Seiryuu-sama's power. The scale and the Shinzahou are both in Kutou, silly Hyoushin. I'm in Sairou."

"I see." Hyoushin sighed heavily. "So the further from those you are, the more erratic your moods and behaviour... correct?"

"I am Seiryuu's servant. The guardian spirit left to protect Kutou." Suiko tossed her head. "I am not designed to go trekking across icky deserts to find alien treasures."

"The sooner we leave this place, the sooner we'll be back where there's water, Suiko-sama." Aoiketsu suggested hesitantly. "At least at the camp there's the watering hole... and if we can find the relic as easily as we did the Shinzahou, we'll be back in Kutou soon."

Suiko eyed Aoiketsu for a moment, but as the soldiers began to leave the foot of the mountain, she did not hesitate to follow them, and nor did she complain about the briskness of their pace.

The return leg of the walk was quicker than it had been on the way to the mountain, for the sun was dropping in the sky and with the incentive of fresh water in their minds, all the tired and dusty travellers set to their task with renewed vigour. Consequently they arrived at the camp before darkness fell over the barren landscape to find that Bouri and the other two soldiers had obeyed Hyoushin's commands to the letter. The basic travel rations had been

meticulously divided and prepared, and for a while there was little sound audible beneath the desert trees than the consuming of food and drink.

At length, Miramu sat back against the trunk of a nearby tree, pulling his worn pouch from his belt as he slipped the herb root between his teeth, chewing it absently as he cast Hyoushin a sidelong glance.

“Can I see it, then?” He murmured, and Hyoushin eyed him warily.

“See what?”

“Byakko’s mirror.”

“Why?”

“I’m curious.” Miramu’s lips twitched into a smile. “Why, don’t you trust me? Didn’t I lead you to it? Hyoushin, I’m hurt.”

Hyoushin’s eyes narrowed, but he slipped his hand into the cloth bag, pulling out the mirror and setting it down on the ground between them. Miramu pursed his lips, reaching out a hesitant finger to touch it’s shimmering surface, and as he did so, a flare of white light glittered around it. He drew his hand back, amusement in his eyes.

“Well. It truly is the Shinzahou.” He murmured. “You have indeed done well.”

“What did you do to it?” Hyoushin demanded.

“Nothing at all.” Miramu shook his head. “I don’t want anything to do with it. It might think it has a connection to me, as a Westerner. But as far as I’m concerned, you can throw it off the next cliff without causing me any distress. It’s a cursed mirror in the hands of the West. Take it to the East and play with it — give it to your Emperor and let him have his fun.”

Hyoushin eyed him in surprise, scooping the now silent mirror back up as he returned it to its pouch.

“I believe you mean that.” He murmured, and Miramu nodded.

“With all my heart.” He agreed easily. “Take it with my compliments. I wouldn’t have brought you so far otherwise... would I?”

“Miramu, do you really know where the relic is? Byakko’s relic?” Aoiketsu asked at this point, and Miramu glanced at him, offering him a strange, predatorial smile.

“You know all about divine relics, do you, Aoi-kun?” He asked softly. “For a soldier, you seem remarkably well educated in these things.”

“Aoi and I fetched Seiryuu’s scale from the underwater cave.” Maichu put in bluntly. “That’s all. We’re not stupid, you know. Just because we bear arms, we’re not idiots.”

“Perhaps not.” Miramu stretched his hands over his head, not noticeably put out by the youngster’s protestations. “However, I’m afraid my answer regarding Byakko’s relic may be of some small disappointment.”

“You don’t know anything about it, do you?” Maichu demanded, and Miramu chuckled.

“On the contrary, I do.” He murmured. “It is a fang — the mage spirit sealed within it is known as Kitora, and like the Shinzahou, it lies somewhere in the Kanin mountains. Unfortunately that is as much as I know. And besides, even if I knew more...”

He shrugged.

“Getting to it won’t be easy.” He reflected. “You cannot just walk into a sacred shrine. You must break the seal on the shine door first. And only those with special, particular blood can do that.”

“But Maichu and I managed to get into Suiko-sama’s shrine.” Aoiketsu objected. “Okay, it wasn’t so easy as all that, but we did get the door to open. And I was able to take the casket from the flames that protected it. It can’t be that difficult to break through Byakko’s seal — can it?”

“You broke the seal on my shrine?” Suiko’s head jerked up at this, and she stared at Aoiketsu as if seeing him for the first time. Aoiketsu held up his hands.

“I’m sorry.” He said hastily. “I didn’t mean disrespect to Seiryuu. And I didn’t mean... to defile the place with my blood. But we... we managed to..and the Emperor...”

“*Your* blood opened the door?” Suiko’s strange blue eyes narrowed and she reached out a ghostly finger to touch him. “Who *are* you, soldier? Why is it possible for you to have done such a thing? The dirty assassin speaks the truth — to open the door of the shrine requires the blood of the Chosen. You are not one of Seiryuu’s Celestial Warriors... how can it be that you released the seal?”

“Maybe he’s Seiryuu no Miko.” Kayu suggested frankly, and Maichu

laughed, even as indignation flared in Aoiketsu's odd seiran eyes.

"Stop it." He ordered. "I don't know how it happened, Suiko-sama. That's just what did. And it only opened it some. The Emperor said it was to do with the fact I really wanted to help Kutou — that's why my blood had an effect."

"Rubbish." Suiko said frankly. "He's lying. Even from here I can feel the blue blood rushing through your veins, Kaiga Aoiketsu. You are special... Seiryuu runs through you like water through a stream. Your Emperor is a fool. And so are you, to believe the untruths he tells."

"I'd advise you not to speak so of Kutou's emperor before me, Suiko." There was a warning note in Hyoushin's voice, and the mage sent him a quizzical look. "Remember who it is who controls the Shinzahou and your relic, currently. Besides, the question of the scale is no longer important. We have it safely in our possession. How to retrieve Byakko's fang is another matter."

"Well, maybe it's less of a problem than you know." Miramu said easily. "If I know Toroki like I think I do, she'll come looking for her treasure. And more, she'll move to safeguard the relic. She knows where it is — she's probably the only one Byakko has trusted with that knowledge, and considering her powers of sight, it's impossible for her not to know something about it. All you need to do is track her... and wait for her to use her blood to open the shrine for you. Then you can take the relic... can't you?"

Hyoushin's eyes narrowed.

"Miramu, I want to know once and for all your connection to this girl." He said softly, and Miramu shook his head, spitting the well-chewed stem out onto the ground as he did so.

"No, you don't." He said evenly. "You want to know if I'm capable enough to follow her tracks and make your life easier. And the answer is yes. We have the Shinzahou, which will call out to her just as she will reach out for it. And more than that, as an assassin, I'm skilled at tracking people. You needn't worry. I'm sure that tomorrow will find us on the trail to Kitora's shrine."

"If that is the case, then, this time you will be accompanying us all the way to the fang's location." Hyoushin said frankly, and Miramu's eyes flickered with something as he cast the Meihi a dark look.

"That was not part of the arrangement."

"It's also not contrary to it." Hyoushin said evenly. "You asked not to be involved in taking the Shinzahou from Toroki. This was granted

you. The woman's life was spared. You were granted this also. But there was nothing said about the relic. And if we are going into the mountains more deeply, Miramu, I will have a local with me who at least knows the terrain and the trackways. You might not know the exact location, but you have a better idea than we do. And if you are such a professional as to be able to track Toroki's trail without being observed, we will have need of your skill."

"I didn't say that." Miramu's eyes narrowed. "She is not someone you can track without her knowledge."

"Are you scared of her?" Maichu asked bluntly, and a flare of rage danced briefly in the assassin's eyes before he got himself under control, shaking his head.

"Why would I be afraid of her?"

"Because you told me yourself that she's predicted your death. That she'll kill you one day." Aoiketsu remembered. "Is that it? Is Maichu right? Are you afraid of her?"

"On the contrary, death would be an interesting new adventure." Miramu said derisively. "I am not afraid of being killed by Toroki."

"Then what is it?" Hyoushin pressed. "If you have a genuine reason not to enter the caves, I would hear it. And then, if I deem it worthwhile, I will consider your feelings. But whilst you are in the employ of my Emperor, and whilst I am in charge of this expedition, you will otherwise bow to my instruction... at least if you do not wish to be taken forcibly to Eiroku and delivered up to those there who have a grievance against you."

There was no emotion in the Meihi's tones, and Miramu frowned, for the first time seeming somewhat unsettled. For the briefest of instants, he appeared like the wildcat that he so disdained, cornered and defensive as something feral glittered in his seiran eyes. Then, as quickly as it had come, it was gone, and at length he sighed.

"All right." He murmured. "I will enter the caves and I will do my best to do as you ask. But you can carry the consequences to your Emperor, if any such arise."

"Consequences of what nature?" Hyoushin demanded, and Miramu shrugged his shoulders.

"I will come, but I will not fight Toroki for you." He murmured. "I will not fight her, I will not kill her. And your promise regarding her life will still stand. But I warn you now — my presence there, alongside you... will not induce the girl to help you. She knows better

than you the man that I am... more than anyone else ever will. Do not expect to find Toroki easy to coerce, if she knows you are aligned with Geiyo Miramu. She and I are acquainted, and she will also know more quickly of your coming, if I am in attendance. But you have insisted, so I will come. And if you regret it, Hyoushin, on your head be it."

"You *are* a coward." Maichu snorted, and Miramu shot the soldier a poisonous look.

"And *you* are dispensible." He hissed. "As soon as I am no longer in the Emperor's service, I will be at liberty to kill anyone I please. So mind your tongue, soldier. I do not take kindly to that word."

Maichu grimaced back in the assassin's direction, and Hyoushin sighed.

"Enough of this." He said frankly. "Tomorrow, we will do as we have already planned. We will find Byakko's fang. And then we will report back to Kutou. There will be no problems. There will be nothing to fear. If we encounter Toroki, we will overcome her the way we did this afternoon. Whatever your reservations or superstitions about her, Miramu, this is what we will do. But for now, we will rest. There will be plenty of time for this on the morrow, after all."

Miramu sent him an uneasy look, and the doubt in the assassin's eyes were not lost on Hyoushin, but he did not comment on it.

"Till tomorrow." He repeated again. "When we will *all* leave camp and venture into the mountains in search of Kitora's shrine."

"This... is the place?"

As Hikari stepped into the cave, she hesitated, glancing around her in some confusion. "Jin, are you sure? This is what the map says... this cave is the one we need to enter by?"

It was the next morning and, after having spent the night camping in the abandoned village, the three young travellers had set off early for the Kanin peaks, at last finding the passage through which they would be able to encounter the Seishi known as Toroki. For Hikari, the distraction was a welcome one, for it gave them all something to focus on and she had found it more easy to push out of her mind Jin's sheepish confession of the day before. He had said nothing on that subject since, and he had not acted any differently from how he had before, but even so, Hikari felt somewhat self-conscious.

"He's in love with me." She murmured to herself as she stepped over a dip in the floor. "Is he really? Is that possible? It's crazy..."

we've known each other about two and a half, three weeks... that's all. Can he really? And more to the point, what do *I* feel about it? What he said is true. This isn't my world, and it's a stupid thing to even think about. So why am I thinking about it? I don't think... I'm in love with him. But then... I haven't thought about Haru-kun since I've been here, either. So maybe I'm not in love with him either. And in that case, how do I even know what being in love is? I've nothing to compare it to."

"That's what the map says." Jin spoke now, distracting her once more from her swirling thoughts as he cast her a grin. "Although it looks barren, I think we should follow it. It's an old miner's track, that's for sure... and there are sconces. We should light a torch and take it with us, since we're going to be going deeper and we don't want to get lost."

"We won't get lost." Shishi shook her head. "I'll mark the walls as we go. That way we can find the way out. And the torches here are missing, Jin, but the ones in the next two sconces aren't."

"Right." Jin agreed, hurrying forwards to dislodge one of the torches from its ancient holder. "Guess it's times like this that it would be helpful to have the tessens with us, huh?"

"I suppose." Shishi sounded rueful. "But like hell would Kashira have let us take that with us. Even if I could use it — which I can't."

"Well, basic bandit techniques will have to suffice then." Jin said pragmatically, striking flint against the stone wall as he brushed the torch against the resultant spark. It flared immediately into life, and Jin nodded, satisfied.

"There we go. One light."

"You guys have an answer for everything." Hikari sighed. "When you do stuff like that, I feel even more useless."

"Shut up with the whining." Shishi ordered. "You're going to be our chief negotiator when we meet this Toroki girl — right?"

"Right." Hikari nodded.

"Can you feel the Shinzahou yet?" Jin asked, and Hikari shook her head.

"No." She admitted. "Not at all."

"But we're sure we're on the right path?" Shishi pursed her lips, and Jin nodded.

“Anara’s map is very clear.” He agreed. “So long as she’s given us the right information, we’re going the right way.”

“More than that, there are other tracks.” Shishi’s eyes narrowed, as she gestured to the floor. “Fresh footsteps... have those Kutou bastards got here first after all?”

“Well, I guess we’ll find out.” Jin said grimly, as Hikari’s eyes widened in horror.

“Kutou’s men? You mean they might be right here in the cave *with* us?” She whispered. Shishi shrugged.

“Maybe.” She said briefly. “Don’t worry, Hiki. We won’t let anything happen to you.”

“There’s light from up ahead.” Jin gestured with his free hand. “Looks like a chamber... I’d say we’ve found our target.”

“Then Hiki and I’ll go check it out.” Shishi grasped her friend by the hand before she could protest. “You stay here and watch for Kutou’s lot... just in case they’re around.”

“Are you sure?” Jin looked doubtful, and Shishi nodded her head.

“Positive.” She agreed. “Come on, Hiki. Don’t just stand there. This is your big entrance.”

And before the young schoolgirl could protest, she found herself tugged in the direction of the flickering torchlight.

“The lion... and the light.”

As they stepped into the chamber proper, a soft voice made them hesitate and as one they turned, Shishi’s fingers hovering towards the hilt of her sword as she scanned the room for any sign of the speaker. As she did so, a young woman stepped out of the shadows, glancing from one to the other and then nodding her head as if confirming something to herself.

“Yes. That is who you are.” She murmured. “Sukunami Hikari... at last we have the fortune to meet face to face.”

“How... how do you know my name?” Hikari stared, caught off guard, and the stranger smiled, spreading her hands.

“I know a lot of things.” She reflected. “I’ve been waiting for you for a while, Hikari. You and your friends.”

“Are you... *Toroki*?” Shishi asked doubtfully, and the girl nodded, flexing her right hand so that the two travellers could see the white

mark glittering on the tip of her index finger.

“So I am.” She agreed. “And you are Suzaku’s people. The lion — Kou Karin — and the light — Sukunami Hikari. You’ve come to see me to ask for my help — to ask about the Shinzahou. Haven’t you?”

“Yes.” Hikari agreed, before Shishi could react to the use of her full name. “That’s right. Toroki-san, I’m sorry to come and disturb you like this... Anara-san told us that you didn’t like company. But it’s important... we had to find you, because...”

“Anara-san?” Toroki’s eyes widened. “My mother was the one who sent you to me here?”

“She was.” Hikari agreed. “Please don’t be angry about it, Toroki-san. She wanted us to help you, too.”

“I see.” For a moment, emotion glittered in the girl’s strange blue eyes. Then she smiled, shaking her head.

“You do not need to worry.” She murmured. “Besides, I’ve expected your coming for some time. Only...”

She sighed, settling herself down on the floor as she gestured for her companions to follow suit.

“I cannot give you what you came here to find.” She admitted. “I’m sorry... but that is the truth.”

“Not even if we tell you that it could help stop the destruction of this world?” Shishi demanded. Toroki shrugged.

“The Shinzahou is no longer here.” She said frankly. “You are not the only people to visit me of late. The men of the Dragon came yesterday, and took the Shinzahou away with them. Kutou’s men.”

“Kutou!” Shishi muttered a curse, and Hikari bit her lip.

“Did they hurt you?” She whispered, and Toroki shook her head.

“No. Not really. But I didn’t put up that much of a fight.” She admitted. “They came to take it and I did not stop them.”

“Why not?” Shishi demanded. “Are you crazy? They’re the ones who’re going to destroy everything — I thought you had some kind of psychic power! Why can’t you see that?”

“Time is a delicate balance.” Toroki sighed, running her fingers through her snow-white hair, and with a jolt Hikari registered the strain that their companion had been under. “It’s hard, sometimes, to know how to act. Especially when you know where some of those

actions may lead. But I'll explain it to you, if I can. Even though I knew you were coming also, I knew that Kutou would take the treasure. And more, that I would let them. Because by doing so..."

She trailed off, shaking her head in frustration.

"All I know is that it was something that had to happen." She admitted.

"But if Kutou really are massing power that could cause devastation...?" Hikari faltered. "Toroki, you've seen that, haven't you? Like I have. The death of this world. Anara-san told me you had — many times. Why would you want that to happen?"

"I don't." Toroki managed a faint smile. "Everything I do is designed to try and stop it from happening."

"Then why did you give your frigging treasure to Kutou?!" Shishi exclaimed.

"Because that's what was meant to happen." Toroki responded softly.

"But you said you want to prevent it. Don't you?" Hikari looked confused.

"I haven't ever been able to prevent a vision coming true." Toroki responded with a sad shrug. "No matter how hard I've tried to. And as each comes true, the others become more vivid in my mind. It's a calculated gamble, I realise that. But the only vision I care about preventing is the end of existence. Nothing else. But in order to prevent it, I must see it more clearly first. And in order for that to happen, other things I've seen must come true as they're meant to happen. Since Kutou came yesterday, I have had a more clear picture of your coming. And it gave me hope, Hikari. You *are* the light... I'm sure of that now. Even though it is vague and hazy in my mind, you're the one thing that stands between this world and destruction. So long as you are here, there is a faint hope. That's the only thing I'm clinging to. Nothing else matters, at the end of the day. Kutou or Kounan — I don't have loyalties to either one. But I'm born to protect this world — to protect Sairou. And that's what I'm trying to do."

"So you let them take it so that you could get a better idea of Shishi and I coming to see you?" Hikari asked slowly. Toroki nodded.

"Yes." She agreed. "So that I could discover if you truly were the light I had seen in my dreams for so long. Although it's difficult to do. The Shinzahou accentuated my powers by a lot... in both good and bad ways. Things are not so clearcut for me to see now that the

treasure has gone... it's a gamble that I can manage to see and forstall these things without it."

She smiled.

"But it's also a relief to have it gone, in some ways." She murmured. "At last my thoughts are my own again. I can speak to you without your lives flashing in front of my eyes... that's not been possible for such a long time. It's nice, to have some control over Toroki's spirit. I feel like she's dictated everything I've done for the past ten years. And even though that's my fate — my destiny — sometimes it's wearing."

"Taiitsukun said we were to seek your advice and help, and listen to what you told us." Hikari reflected. "So... so that must mean she knew you were waiting for us to come."

"Taiitsukun?" Toroki's eyes widened. "The real Taiitsukun? Emperor of the Heavens?"

"Yes." Hikari confirmed. "She told us to seek you out, Toroki. That you wouldn't fight us — but that we should ask for your help and advice. Especially in dealing with this land. And... Amefuri. She mentioned him, too."

At the mention of the other Seishi's name, Toroki's beautiful eyes clouded, and slowly she shook her head.

"I can't tell you about someone who has severed himself from Byakko so completely." She murmured. "Amefuri is someone who acts alone — he is a rogue, no more, no less. He does not let me see his thoughts and feelings... and there is nothing I can tell you about him except that you must not cross his path if you can avoid it. He does not see things reasonably... and he may be violent for no reason. You would do better not to worry about Amefuri at all — he can certainly bring no benefit to your cause."

"That's more or less what Taiitsukun said." Hikari acknowledged. "And if that's so, we'll avoid him for sure."

"That would be best." Toroki agreed. She frowned, eying the two young girls keenly.

"You've come here seeking something that I can't give you." She murmured. "But Kutou also intend on taking the relic of Byakko from the shrine of Kitora. They wish to raise Byakko's mage from her sleep, and when they came here, they had one such mage already with them. Their own, Suiko, the water witch. To break the seal on Kitora's shrine, they need the blood of Byakko's Chosen -but I fear this is

something they may already have. Either way, I have to go to the shrine of Kitora and try and safeguard this treasure, if I can. They will definitely go there — and the Shinzahou with them.”

“So if we come to Kitora’s shrine with you, we might be able to get the Shinzahou back from Kutou?” Shishi asked hopefully. Toroki shrugged.

“I don’t know.” She admitted. “I haven’t seen that. And my visions are blurry and weaker than they were.”

“You’re weak yourself, aren’t you?” Hikari realised. “You look exhausted... are you all right?”

“Yes. I’ll be fine. Seishi are more resilient than normal people.” Toroki nodded her head. She smiled. “Besides, now the Shinzahou is gone, I can sleep far more easily. I’ve gone several nights without rest before... the power of the treasure coupled with my own Seishi power pushes the mind close to insanity. Perhaps beyond it. I don’t know. Without it here, my thoughts are rational and cohesive... they are my own, as I said. I’ll soon recover my strength, now that Byakko is not putting such a strain on me.”

“Then we should team up.” Hikari suggested. “You and I, we both want the same thing — to protect this world from destruction. So we should work together. Shouldn’t we?”

“I’ve been waiting for you to say that.” Toroki’s eyes flickered with humour, and she nodded. “Yes. I agree. You, Suzaku no Shinzahou. And I, Byakko no Seishi... our aims are indeed the same.”

“You know that I’m...?” Hikari faltered, and Toroki nodded.

“Yes.” She agreed. “But you mustn’t fall into the trap of believing that’s all you are to this world, Hikari. You’re not just an object — not just a treasure, like Suzuno-sama’s mirror. You’re a person too. You’re Hikari... and that’s why you’re so powerful a person to this world. You’ll come to understand what I mean, eventually. And so will I, I hope — even I don’t know fully what I mean by it. I just know it’s true. That when you stepped into this cave, I saw that there was a way to save this world. And that somehow, you being here is the key.”

“Then I was right to stay.” Hikari said resolutely. “And I’ll stay until it’s resolved.”

“If we’re all teaming up and becoming buddy-buddy, then I’ll go get Jin.” Shishi got to her feet, pausing as she reached the doorway. “Oh, but Toroki? My name ain’t Karin. At least, I ain’t ever going to answer to it, if you call me that. It’s Shishi. Okay? You said yourself, the lion

— that’s the only thing I answer to.”

“Shishi.” Toroki paused then nodded her head. “All right. I apologise, Shishi. I’ll remember.”

She smiled, and Hikari realised that the Seishi was not only extremely pretty, but not that much older than they were.

“If it comes to that, I’m not really much of a Seishi without the treasure I was born to guard or the partner I was assigned to work alongside.” She continued now, in her gentle, western tones. “You’ve met my mother, so you must know that I have another name. I’m Geiyo Myoume — and I’d rather you called me that. It’s been a long time since I felt like Myoume at all — and it would be nice to hear it. I’ve been Toroki for four solid years, and I... I think Myoume finally has control of my mind back again. So... if it’s all right with you...”

“Myoume it is.” Hikari nodded, holding out her hand, and Myoume took it, shaking it firmly. “There. It’s settled. Shishi, go find Jin. The sooner we work out what to do next the better — we don’t have much time to lose.”

“I’m gone.” Shishi nodded, and Hikari found herself alone in the cave with the young Celestial Warrior.

“Your mother was really worried about you. She hoped we’d take the treasure away from you and let you be Myoume again.” She said quietly, and Myoume’s eyes softened.

“I see.” She murmured. “My poor mother... she’s suffered so much because of Byakko’s calling.”

“How old are you, Myoume?”

“Twenty summers, I think.” Myoume smiled. “Roughly... it’s hard to keep track of time in a place like this, especially when your mind is being ravaged and assailed by the lives of others. But I think it’s been four years I’ve been here. And I was sixteen when I left the village. So I believe... twenty is correct.”

“Anara-san said it had been four years.” Hikari agreed. She sighed, leaning back against the cave wall.

“I’m fifteen.” She admitted. “And I couldn’t imagine running off from home to shut myself away in a cave... weren’t you scared?”

“I’ve been scared since the day I first had the vision of the end of the world.” Myoume agreed soberly. “But there’s no escaping it. This is my duty. I have no life outside of Byakko’s cause, sad as that might seem. I have no other real purpose for living. And if it wasn’t that I

believe Byakko intends me to find a way to protect this world, I'd never have relinquished my grip on the Shinzahou. As I said, it's a delicate balance — letting things happen, making them reality so that I can see more clearly what I want to prevent... all the time hoping I haven't left it too late to actually intervene."

"It must be hard, seeing things you can't stop." Hikari reflected, and Myoume nodded.

"It is." She agreed sadly. "Very hard."

She reached up to touch her snowy locks absently.

"My hair is testament to the horrors I've seen." She added. "I was not born with white hair, Hikari — my natural colour is black, just as yours is. But subjecting a small child to the kind of things I was forced to see... took its toll. My hair turned when I was ten years old, and it has never returned to black. Maybe it never will — perhaps it's the mark of the white tiger running through me, after all. Or maybe it's because I've never stopped seeing those horrors... today is the first day in a long while I've not woken in a sweat or a panic."

She glanced at her hands.

"I'm ashamed, but the human in me is relieved at the break." She admitted. "Even if it's weak to feel that way."

"It's not weak." Hikari shook her head. "I feel like I'm useless pretty much all the time, if that helps. But your hair really went white? Just like that? Because of the things you saw?"

"Because of the visions." Myoume agreed solemnly. "I've seen a lot of things, and many of them won't make sense to me until they're more ready to come true. I just hope I can piece things together enough to be in time. But now you're here — I have some faith that maybe, I will be able to do something. You are Hikari — you are the light that I saw. And... I'm really glad you're here."

At the sincerity in the girl's eyes, Hikari smiled, reaching out a hand to squeeze her companion's reassuringly, but Myoume pulled her hand back, shaking her head.

"You don't want to do that." She said ruefully, scooping a black glove up from the floor and pulling it over her exposed right hand. "Believe me."

"Why not?" Hikari looked surprised.

"My mark is the stellar mark of Toroki. It represents the three stars — or the three lines of sight. Past, present and future." Myoume

responded. "Direct contact with it creates a pathway into another's thoughts and feelings... allowing me to see them, and even, if I take them off guard, to manipulate them or draw strength from them."

"You can read minds, too?" Hikari stared, and Myoume shrugged.

"Of a sort." She agreed. "If I was to touch you, I'd be able to see and hear what was in your mind at that very moment. If your guard was up against me, that would probably be all... if not, I might be able to push my own suggestions into your thoughts... as a form of defence against a hostile enemy, it's a calming technique and one I used to use in the village, when they'd gang up on me and call me a witch. I don't like to do it — I don't like other people's thoughts within my head. But sometimes... I can even push through to the memories beyond. And... if I can do that... I can draw the strength from it to create a delusion. I can make them see their memories, or my own thoughts, as if they were happening before them."

She sighed, folding her hands in her lap.

"It's an ugly, ugly technique and I dislike it." She added. "So I keep my hand covered in company, unless I have no choice. Bad enough I suffer the visions I do without making other people suffer them."

Hikari's eyes softened.

"When Anara-san told me about you, I thought you must be a very sad person." She reflected. "I think you are... a little bit. Aren't you?"

"Maybe." Myoume offered her a wry smile. "But sadness is part of life. And we move on."

"Speaking of which, that sounds like Shishi and Jin." Hikari got to her feet, hauling her companion up with her. "He's another of my 'guardians', if you like — he's a bandit, just like Shishi. I trust him — you can, too."

"If you say so, I will." Myoume eyed her keenly. "You're Suzaku no Shinzahu... I can have faith in your word."

"I don't know about that." Hikari flushed. "But I'm glad you think so."

Myoume opened her mouth to reply, but as she did so, she caught sight of the young bandits, and as her gaze rested on Jin she faltered, her indigo eyes opening wide with dismay as colour drained from her cheeks.

"Myoume?" Hikari murmured. "Something the matter?"

“Hiki, what did you do to the Seishi?” Shishi demanded. “She looks about to pass out.”

“Are you all right, Myoume-san?” Jin asked softly. “Shishi’s right — you don’t look so good.”

Myoume swallowed hard, holding out her hand to touch Jin’s cheek.

“Rou Jintsui.” She whispered hoarsely, and Jin stared at her in surprise.

“How’d you know that?” He demanded. “Even on the mountain, most people jus’ call me Jin... how’d you know my family name as well?”

“She’s a psychic, ain’t she? I guess she saw it. Or read your mind. Or something.” Shishi reflected. “Myoume — what the hell are you staring at him like that for? I thought it was okay, us being here like this!”

Myoume bit her lip, and Hikari could tell that it was a genuine effort to pull herself together. She sent Jin an uneasy glance, then shook her head.

“Nothing.” She whispered. “I’m sorry. I... I’m just tired. That’s all.”

“Deluded is more like it.” Shishi murmured, and Jin frowned.

“Have I done something to upset you?” He asked quietly, and Myoume sent him a pained look, shaking her head.

“No. Nothing at all.” She responded. “I’m sorry. I just... for a moment... everything blurred. I’m all right now. I’m sorry to startle you.”

“Are you sure?” Hikari was concerned, but Myoume nodded.

“I’m fine.” She murmured. “Really. I... I’m fine.”

“Then we’re going to Kitora’s shrine?” Jin asked, and Myoume bit her lip. Slowly she nodded her head.

“I know the quickest way.” She agreed reluctantly. “Even so, it will take time to reach it and you must trust me. You must trust me and do exactly as I say. Especially... especially you, Rou Jintsui. Do you promise me that you will?”

“If you think it’s important, I guess so.” Jin looked startled. “Sure. This is your patch... you’re the expert.”

“Yes. Good.” Myoume’s eyes seemed to flicker with faint relief, and

she nodded. “In that case... it may be... possible. To get there. And... I... I will lead you.”

She gestured a gloved hand towards a hidden cave entrance that lay to the back of her humble hiding place.

“Follow me.”

Chapter 11

Chapter Ten

“I had no idea there was such a network of passages beneath the mountains.”

As the group of dusty Suzaku travellers followed their enigmatic guide through the corridors and tunnels that took them deeper and deeper into the heart of an underground world, Jin glanced around him, faintly awed by the smooth carving of the rounded ceilings and the occasional glitter of something beyond stone set deep into the cold dark rock.

“You really know where we’re going in all of this, Myoume?” Shishi put in. “Because these tracks all look sort of similar... and I feel like we’re going in circles.”

“It might seem that way, but we’re not.” Myoume paused, casting her a fleeting smile, although her indigo eyes were still harried and preoccupied. “This is where the mining used to be — a long time ago, when this land was rich in crystals and Sairou was a wealthy country. Of course, that made it a target, too — but since Byakko was summoned and Sairou gained peace and protection, the mountains have been exhausted of minerals and people have moved on elsewhere. There are still areas to the very north of the Kanin range where you can still mine successfully — but all of this area was vacated a long time ago. There are the odd fragments here and there... but that’s all.”

“They glitter sort of like stars in the night sky.” Hikari murmured, gazing upwards, and as Jin followed her gaze he found that he understood what she meant. “Don’t you think so?”

“It’s funny you should say that.” Myoume said evenly. “We’re going to turn left at this next intersection, and then you’ll see just how like stars the Sairou crystals can really be.”

“What do you mean?” Shishi asked curiously. “Are we that close to the shrine of Kitora?”

“No... not by a long shot.” Myoume shook her head. “It’s difficult to keep track of time within the mountain, but I think it would be as well to stop and take a break before we tackle the most difficult part of the pathway and head towards Kitora’s shrine itself.”

“Do we have time to do that?” Hikari asked doubtfully, and Myoume nodded.

“Yes, I believe so.” She agreed. “And it’s better to take a rest in a safe place than in one which may become invaded by those you’re trying to avoid.”

“Kutou’s people.” Shishi frowned. “I guess that makes sense.”

“So we’ll stop, take on water and have a break.” Jin reflected. “None of us slept very long last night, it’s true, and walking in the desert takes it out of you. Besides, you look all in too, Myoume.”

“Yes... perhaps I am tired.” Myoume sighed. “Keeping track of him isn’t as easy as it has been... not having the Shinzahou means I’ve had to work much harder than usual to find him.”

“Find who?” Hikari demanded, and Myoume sent her a regretful look.

“Amefuri.” She admitted, and Shishi’s eyes narrowed.

“Why do you care where he is? I thought we weren’t looking for him.” She demanded.

“That is why I’m doing it.” Myoume owned. “This path is such that, once you pass a certain point, there’s little opportunity for escape. I’m not sure whether he knows the underground trackway or not... I don’t think he does. But I’m keeping as close a tab as I can on his movements, just in case. He is a dangerous man — for you, certainly, an enemy. And I do not wish to lead you right into his path.”

“So he’s around, then?” Hikari asked softly, and Myoume nodded her head.

“I think that Kutou’s men have hired him as a guide to lead them to my cave and the Shinzahou.” She agreed reluctantly. “I’m not sure, but something that they said... I think it’s so. Certainly he’d have no other interest in Byakko’s treasure, not after so long disdaining this place and avoiding me. But he still hasn’t come to face me — and I don’t know what’s in his mind. So if I can keep an eye on his movements, I can try to make sure we avoid him.”

She sighed.

“The trouble is, I very much suspect he can use his skills to track my movements also.” She admitted. “How exactly, I don’t know. At present, he’s not coming towards us. But neither is he moving away... so I must remain alert. And that takes energy.”

“It must be pretty shit, having a fellow Seishi who’s turned bad.” Jin reflected. “Just imagine if Chichiri-san an’ the Kashira were like that — at one another’s throats an’ all.”

“I wouldn’t like to bet who’d win that battle.” Hikari said ruefully, and Shishi snorted.

“Kashira, of course.” She said frankly.

“You’re biased.” Hikari reminded her, and Shishi shrugged.

“Realistic, too.” She replied. “Chichiri doesn’t believe in killing. Kashira’ll do it if the need arises. That’s the difference between them.”

“That doesn’t make Tasuki sound very nice a person.” Hikari reflected, and Shishi shrugged.

“It’s not meant that way.” She said, unconcerned. “You know that I respect Kashira more’n anyone else. I just think it’d be that way. That’s all. If Chichiri was our enemy, Kashira’d take him out. Especially to protect the mountain an’ us... I’m sure of it.”

“I don’t know...” Hikari frowned. “You didn’t see Chichiri, when Meikyo was in danger. I think, if he’d had a clear aim, he might have killed to rescue his daughter.”

“Chichiri and Tasuki are the only surviving members of Suzaku’s band of seven?” Myoume asked softly, and Hikari turned, shaking her head.

“No.” She responded. “My father’s still alive too. Tamahome. But he lives in my world — in the world my mother came from. She was Suzaku no Miko, and he stayed with her when it was all over.”

“Ah, of course.” Myoume agreed. “You are from the Priestess’s world.”

At that moment they reached their destination, and as Myoume led them inside, Jin let out an exclamation, registering the wide, open hollow that had obviously been used as some kind of hideout in the past. Smooth black stone had been carved into makeshift seats and a section of the area had been partitioned, as if to provide a sleeping area. In the centre was a small wooden structure that could have been a table, although it was old and roughly hewn. The ceiling was dotted with random specks of crystal, and as Jin ran his gaze over them, he realised that there was nothing coincidental about their positioning. Each seemed to mark out a particular design, separate from its fellows, and he turned, casting the Seishi a quizzical look. At his glance, Myoume nodded her head.

“The seven constellations of Byakko.” She agreed softly. “Tatara. Karasuki. Subaru. Toroki. Tokaki. Kokie. Amefuri.”

As she spoke each name, she pointed, and Hikari glanced across the cavern, a smile touching her lips.

“It’s so beautiful, like the real night sky.” She murmured. “And this was created... by the original Byakko Seishi?”

“I imagine so.” Myoume sighed, sinking down onto a smoothed rock and indicating for her fellows to join her. “But I don’t know for sure. I know the pasts and futures of many people, but my own is something of a blank. Or at least, Toroki’s. I know that she is me, and that I am her reborn. That this place was once somewhere she came, because that’s how I know of it. Sometimes I see fleeting pictures, when I’m here — pictures of people of the past, and a camaraderie that’s just beyond my grip. But at the end of the day, I am not the Toroki who was born to fight for Suzuno-sama. Amefuri and I were born this time around to be Guardians of the Shinzahoo — the treasure blessed after Byakko had been summoned and Sairou had been saved. I know the legends that everyone else in Sairou knows, but I have no real awareness of the real Toroki at all. It frustrates me to admit it — but these are things I can’t see. It’s as if, when I was born into this form, the memory of her past existence had to be sealed and suppressed to allow me to be Geiyo Myoume.”

“I guess that’s sort of like Dad.” Hikari realised. “I mean, he’s not Sou Kishuku any more... I’ve been trying to get my head around how he could be Sou Kishuku and Sukunami Taka, and how he could have lived two completely different lives. But maybe this is how. Maybe Tamahome... Sou Kishuku... maybe that got locked up inside him so that he could be with my mother and start a new life as Sukunami Taka in my world. So that things wouldn’t become confused. Only... they have been, because he does remember. And I heard him talking about it — that before I... before I wound up here, he seemed confused about certain memories and things. I thought he was lying to me, at the time, but now I think... he was remembering someone else’s life inside of him. And that... that’s pretty freaky. When you think about it.”

“Kashira says the reason he and Chichiri don’t spend time with the reborn Suzaku Seishi is because of that, too.” Shishi said thoughtfully. “That though they are the reborn warriors, and they have characteristics in common, they’re different, too. And to live their new lives, they have to forget their old ones. So it’s sealed inside of them... so they can be the people they are now. Something like that.”

“I suppose it’s a divine safeguard.” Myoume said ruefully. “But either way, I’d like to know more about the woman whose life I once had. Even if just to know that I’m following the right path.”

She spread her hands.

“I don’t even know her real name, although I know she was a woman.” She added. “It’s shameful, but true. When I’m here, I always feel I’m not worthy of Byakko’s mark. Because I didn’t do any of the great things they did to protect Sairou. And even less do I deserve to be here now I’ve lost their treasure to enemy hands — but even so, it’s a safe place to rest. Noone but Byakko’s people know of it.”

“Does Amefuri?” Jin asked softly, and Myoume shook her head.

“I doubt it.” She responded. “And even if he did, he would avoid it. He has nothing to do with Byakko if he can help it.”

“Then it really is safe here.” Shishi decided. “I suppose that’s why this place existed in the first place, then. As a safe haven for Byakko’s people in times of danger.”

“I think so.” Myoume agreed. “We’ll stay here a while, and then move on when we’re rested. Time doesn’t really exist underground, and it will be dark no matter what time we leave, so I advise you to get some rest — sleep, if you like. We have a tough climb up to Kitora’s shrine, and as yet, I don’t think Kutou are even half as close as we are. If I’m right, that Amefuri is guiding them... they’re still above ground, and some way from here. It will take them some time to get as close as this, because on land there is not such a direct path... even if Amefuri has an idea where he is going, I don’t think his knowledge is as exact as mine. And if he is following me, my stopping here will also hinder their progress. You have time to sleep, if you want.”

“They won’t come underground?” Hikari asked, and Myoume shook her head.

“No, I don’t think so.” She responded. “Not till they have to. These passages are confusing to anyone who doesn’t know them instinctively. I rely on the fleeting whispers of Toroki’s past memory to guide me through them. But then, the little I know about the real Toroki was that she spent a lot of time in the mountains when the crystal mines were at their peak. Maybe her people were miners — I don’t know for sure, but I know this place was a second home to her. This base may well have been her idea — most likely she spent a lot of time navigating this territory, maybe even working in the mine herself before Byakko called her. In this I have a slight advantage.”

“That’s how you knew where you were going.” Jin realised, and Myoume smiled.

“Yes.” She agreed. “Even if I can’t remember her life, I have fleeting things which must have come from her somewhere along the line. Those faint connections which tell me that I truly am Toroki reborn, even if I am not the Toroki who helped to save Sairou. That’s why I take it so seriously, Byakko’s work. She fought hard — she dedicated her life to Byakko no Miko and the protection of the West, at all costs. Because of that, I feel I ought to do the same. That she’d want me to... if she were still alive. To accept Toroki’s duty and defend Sairou, however I can.”

Hikari stifled a yawn, glancing across at the segregated section of ground as she did so.

“If it’s really safe, I’m going to take a nap.” She murmured. “Not for long, but...”

“It’s all right. You do that.” Jin assured her. “Shishi, you too — you’re still recovering from your concussion, whether you want to admit it or not.”

“I’m fine, you moron.” Shishi cuffed her friend impatiently, shaking her head, but Jin was not to be easily dissuaded.

“Who’s in charge of this little jaunt?” He retorted. “Do as you’re told, Shi-chan. You look tired, even if you don’t feel it. And you’re more important to Kashira than any treasure we find... so don’t argue with me, all right?”

“There should be blankets behind the rock in the furthest corner.” Myoume flexed her hand, offering a smile. “It can be cold down here, even if it’s hot up on the surface. And there’s an underground lake along the hallway to the left, if you want to wash off some of the dust and dirt of the desert. It is cold — but it’s pure water, from the mountain sources that flow through the core of the Kanin mountains.”

“If nothing else, we should fill up our gourds from there.” Shishi decided. “That first... come on, Hiki. To the left, Myoume?”

“Yes. First turning — you’ll hear the rush of water as you go.” Myoume agreed. “It’ll refresh you — it’s bitter and chilled, but stories do say it has regenerative qualities. Water is scarce in Sairou, so considered a gift from the heavens themselves... after all, rain falls from the sky, and the sky is linked to the heavens. And the mountains touch the sky, so they are the pathway between this world and that one. This is really a very holy place, you know... legend calls it the

birthplace of Byakko himself, and that's how the peaks got their collective name... based on that story. It's probably why the Byakko Shichi Seishi chose to have their base here... it's certainly why Kitora's fang is sealed here, and it drew me here, too."

"How they got their collective name? Do you mean Kanin?" Hikari looked blank, and Myoume nodded.

"The name is written with the characters *kan* — meaning 'heaven' and *in* — meaning" tiger ". She said evenly, scribing the word in the dust as she spoke." The character 'in' represents the stellar tiger, not the ordinary beast — because in many ways, Byakko is a stellar tiger. And the character '*kan*' has a dual meaning — it can also read as 'drought'...a condition for which the lands of the West are famous. Do you read Chinese, Hikari?"

"Not very well. I mean, I'm only in middle school." Hikari admitted. "And we don't... I mean... Chinese isn't..."

She faltered, and Myoume grinned.

"It's okay." She said softly. "Many of the peasant folk hereabouts are completely illiterate anyway. You're probably better off than them... and you're a foreigner to this world."

"Sometimes I'm really aware of that fact, too." Hikari sighed, and Jin bit his lip, registering the expression in the girl's hazel eyes.

"If we had gotten Byakko's Shinzahou, maybe you could've gone home, huh?" He murmured, and Hikari started, sending him a surprised look.

"Jin?"

"I was just thinking." Jin spread his hands, trying to ignore the feelings that swirled within him. "That if we'd managed to get here first... if we manage to get the treasure from the Kutou people tomorrow... you could go home."

"I... I don't know." Hikari faltered. "I mean, I want to... I miss my family and my world a lot. But... from what Myoume said... if I went home, it wouldn't be a good thing. Would it?"

She cast Myoume a glance, and the Seishi shrugged.

"My vision isn't clear enough to really know." She admitted. "Yet. But it will be... at least I hope it will. I think you should stay here for now, Hikari — but that's just a gut instinct. It has nothing to do with Toroki's sight."

“Right now it’s what I’m doing anyway.” Hikari sighed. “It’s all right. I’m fine. Really. Just sometimes I realise how little I know about this world.”

“Well, there’s time to teach you that.” Shishi said firmly. “You’re doing that wimpy Hiki moaning thing again. Come on, we were going to go clean up... so stop dawdling, will you?”

She paused, sending Jin a pointed look.

“You stay here.” She added. “Washing is a girls only event.”

“All right, I get it, I’m not a pervert.” Jin held up his hands in mock surrender. “You guys go do whatever it is you have to do... I’m in no hurry to do anything but sit here for a while, to be honest. And I’m curious to know more about the people who took the Shinzahou — I ain’t gonna come watch you kids strip off.”

“We’re not kids.” Hikari protested, and Jin’s expression became rueful.

“Turn of phrase.” He acknowledged. “Sorry, Hikari. I didn’t mean it how it sounded.”

“He’s hopeless.” Shishi rolled her eyes. “Hiki, are you coming already? It’ll be tomorrow before you know it otherwise!”

With that, the redhead forcibly pulled her friend out of the chamber, and Myoume let out a low chuckle of amusement.

“They are refreshing company for my cobwebbed brain.” She murmured absently, and Jin shot her a sidelong glance.

“A little Shishi can go a long way, sometimes.” He said ruefully. “But she has a good heart. Just much too much spirit for the average teenager... she’ll never accept that she’s only fourteen an’ she’s got plenty of time to throw herself into stupid situations.”

“She’s as young as that?” Myoume looked thoughtful. “I suppose she would be. I suppose Tasuki of Reikaku-zan can’t be much older than thirty five or thirty six, even now... he was a young man of your age when he visited Sairou and collaborated with Tatara and the others.”

“Yes, he was.” Jin agreed. “And Shishi is his only child, so I take it pretty seriously, looking out for her. She’s like my kid sister, unofficially... it’s a hell of a lot of work.”

“Yes... little sisters are a lot of trouble for an older brother.” Myoume’s eyes became sad, and Jin frowned, eying her quizzically.

“What’s bothering you?” He asked. “Somethin’ is, an’ it’s been doin’ so since we met. Since before that, maybe. Somethin’ to do with me? Or with Amefuri? Or both?”

“Both.” Myoume agreed. “But there’s not much to say on either subject.”

She sighed heavily.

“Amefuri and I grew up together in the way you and Shishi have.” She murmured. “He was the dearest person to me, when we were children. You have to understand that... the way he is now... it’s not the way he’s always been. What he’s become... the evil that surrounds him... that’s not the person I looked up to when I was small. I was a strange child... and I did things that unnerved others in the village. But when he was there, noone would hurt me. Because everyone knew that no matter what, he’d protect me. He always did. And then...”

She sighed, shaking her head.

“Things broken can’t so easily be fixed.” She said resignedly. “I shouldn’t be troubling you with this... quite the opposite, I shouldn’t be defending him to you at all. I should be warning you more of the dangers... you especially, of all of you.”

“Me especially.” Jin’s eyes narrowed. “This has something to do with the way you reacted when you first saw me, doesn’t it? I’ve been meaning to ask you about that, but I wanted to know when Shishi and Hikari weren’t around to hear it. Whatever it was, it freaked you out. Now, maybe you know something deep and dark about me — you called me Rou Jintsui, and even though that’s the name I was given when I was born, I haven’t a clue if Rou is my real family name or not. That being so, I’ve never really used it. I don’t know who the man was who sired me, and my mother changed her name as often as she changed her dresses, because she owed money in every town we went to.”

Myoume sighed, shaking her head.

“I know you are Rou Jintsui.” She murmured, running her finger across the dusty ground as she scribed the three characters that made up the bandit’s name. “When Hikari and Shishi referred to you as ‘Jin’, I saw quite another character, and it threw me off my game a little. I don’t understand quite why... but you are Rou Jintsui. No matter what character your name is written with... you are him.”

“I am.” Jin frowned, confused. “And I don’t know how you can see kanji when you meet someone — that’s sort of strange.”

“My whole world is a strange place, Jin.” Myoume pointed out, and Jin laughed ruefully.

“I suppose it is.” He acknowledged. “All right. And I can explain why it was confused for you — I mean, if you picked up some kind of vibe about it, when Hikari and Shishi were talking. Truth is, my name is Rou Jintsui. That’s the way it’s written, just like you’ve written it there. But on the mountain, I’m generally just Jin. And because I’m quick on my feet, people assumed that that was how I got my name... like Kashira is ‘Genrou’ — the Phantom Wolf of Reikaku-zan. And Shishi is the lion... because, well, you’ve met her. You don’t need me to explain.”

He grinned.

“Kashira’s woman, Anzu-sama, told me that my name means ‘benevolent opportunity.’ He continued.” But that’s really not very relevant to who I am, unless you count the fact I was lucky enough to fall into Reikaku-zan’s hands at a young age. Most people don’t think of that, when they speak to me. They think of me just as ‘Jin’. And on the odd occasions my name gets written down, it’s written with the character for ‘swift’, instead.”

He brushed it in the dust, then shrugged.

“Characters don’t mean much to me.” He added. “I read and write only because Anzu-sama more or less adopted me as her son and Kashira too... Anzu-sama taught Shishi her letters, and Chichiri-san helped. And then they taught me. For a lot of the bandits on the mountain, it’s easier for them to remember just the one character that means something connected with the kind of bandit I am — as opposed to three which really don’t. That’s why.”

“I see.” Myoume bit her lip. “I understand. After all, I’ve lived a long time under the characters for Toroki, but my real name kanji means” Bright Eyes.”

“So now you know that, what is it that disturbs you about me so much?” Jin asked. “If it’s something to do with my heritage...”

“No... it’s not.” Myoume shook her head. “Although I could probably discover the identity of your father by delving into your infant memories, it sounds to me like you already have a fine father figure in your Phantom Wolf, and you don’t need information that will probably be of no benefit whatsoever.”

“I agree.” Jin grinned. “I’ve never cared to know who he was. So if it’s not that... what was it?”

Myoume glanced at her hands, and for a moment she did not speak, just toying with the edge of her black glove as if she was struggling to find the right words to say what she wanted to say.

“Myoume?”

“It’s hard.” At length the Seishi glanced up, and from the melancholy in her seiran eyes Jin realised that whatever it was, it was something serious. “I... I’ve seen a lot of things in my life, Jin. Many, many visions. Many pictures that have yet to play out, and little by little it’s like putting together a puzzle. I slot the pictures into place and make a full image... bit by bit I’m getting a view of everything in its rightful place.”

She bit her lip.

“I have never yet managed to prevent a vision.” She added. “Normally I don’t try to — because letting them come means seeing others more clearly. But this one... I dearly want to prevent it. I just... I don’t know... if I can. Or if telling you... will even matter.”

“Telling me what?” Jin demanded sharply, and Myoume frowned.

“You have feelings for Hikari, don’t you?” She asked softly, and Jin started.

“What the hell does that have to do with anything?” He demanded, and Myoume spread her hands.

“Quite probably, everything.” She admitted. “I am right, then? You do.”

“Yes, dammit, although they’re none of your business.” Jin snapped. “What do you mean, quite probably everything? What have you seen... what are you talking about? Stop with the riddles already — just tell me straight. I’m a bandit... I can handle it. Hikari’s going back to her world, right? I know that... tell me something I haven’t accounted for.”

Myoume’s brows knitted together, and in that instant, her seiran eyes seemed to become opaque as she gazed at him.

“In the shrine of Kitora, when the moon rises over the Kanin mountains, you will encounter the Celestial Warrior known as Amefuri.” She said softly, speaking almost as if in a trance, and despite himself, Jin was unnerved by how detached his companion sounded. “He will threaten the one you care about — the one on whom all the hopes of this world rest. In order to preserve her life, you will sacrifice your own. You will not see the morning sun rise

over Sairou.”

Jin’s heart stilled in his chest at this, and he stared at her, horror glittering in his dark eyes as he grabbed her by the wrists, giving her a little shake.

“Dammit, what are you talking about?” He exclaimed. “Are you friggin’ serious? Snap out of it, Myoume, and talk to me! Tell me what the hell all of that really means!”

“What I said.” Myoume sighed, closing her eyes as she returned to herself. “If you are in the shrine of the fang when the moon rises over Sairou, you will die. That’s why we’ve stopped here, because I want to prevent you from being there... and it’s why I’m so diligently tracking Amefuri’s progress, too. But I don’t know if I can stop this from happening. I can’t keep track of time down here, with no view of the sky. I can only guess. And the truth is, I don’t know anything, yet. And... most of all, I don’t know Amefuri’s mind. All I know is... that if you are in the shrine when the moon climbs in the sky, you will not see the sun rise again. You will exchange your life to preserve Hikari’s. That is why I told you to do exactly as I say, and asked you to give me your word that you would. If I can prevent it, I... I dearly want to do so.”

She swallowed hard, opening her eyes, and Jin was aware of tears in their depths.

“You, Hikari and Shishi have a bond that I envy.” She murmured. “A bond of friendship — of team spirit that I have never known. I... I want to be able to protect that, if I can. You’ve been kind to me — warm, like we’ve become friends even in a short time of knowing one another. I don’t want... this to happen.”

“I see.” Jin gathered his wits. “But if I stay here... if I’m not in the shrine at all... what then? What happens to Hikari, if I’m not there?”

“Will you trust me to protect Hikari?” Myoume asked quietly. “My power is stronger than you’ve seen... and I’ve not had a chance to use it yet, but if I have to, I will do so to defend her. I believe she is the one person who can protect this world, and I’ll fight to protect her, no matter what the cost to myself. I believe Byakko won’t kill me until I’ve served his purpose, so I’m not afraid. If I can keep all of you away from the inner sanctum of Kitora’s shrine, I will... but in the event that I can’t, Jin, you at least must not be there. If it wasn’t that I feared you being attacked by Kutou’s people if I left you to yourselves, I would be making this journey alone. Do you understand? You must *not* face Amefuri before the statue of the Tiger. If you do... not even

Byakko himself can protect you.”

Jin frowned, his emotions swirling within him as he digested her words.

“I gave Kashira my word to protect Hikari and Shishi with everything I had.” He said softly. Myoume nodded.

“I know.” She agreed. “And I know you mean that, when you say it. But I’m serious, Jin. This isn’t a joke. I’m deadly serious. I’ve known for several years that a young man by the name of Rou Jintsui will face Amefuri in the shrine of Kitora... that blood will be spilt and his life will be lost. I never before thought it mattered, but now I know that it does. Even if it means I take longer to understand the other things in my mind, if I can save your life... I want to do so. So I’ve told you what I’ve seen... please, Jin, use this information wisely.”

Jin sighed.

“If I can do as you say, I will.” He said heavily. “I... to be honest with you, I... don’t know if I’m really ready to die just yet. It might sound cowardly, but... it’s how I feel.”

“It’s not cowardly. It’s normal human spirit.” Myoume assured him. “Noone seeks death, except those in the deepest distress.”

“Right.” Jin agreed. “But... Hikari’s life... in all of this, she’s more important to this world than I am. So I... I’ll do as you say, Myoume. If I can. So long as I can stay away, I will. I won’t pretend you’ve not scared me with this. And I ain’t keen to go anywhere near the shrine of Kitora now you’ve told me that. But I gave my word to Kashira an’ Reizeitei-sama both about Hikari an’ Shishi. So... I won’t break that. I won’t let harm come to them.”

He sighed.

“No matter what.”

“You can trust me to protect them, if they need it.” Myoume assured him. “My psychic powers are somewhat unpleasant, for me and for the enemy. But if I must use them, I will. You have my word.”

“Then I suppose I’ll have to do that.” Jin offered her a faint smile, though inside his heart skipped a beat as he registered the solemnity in her dark blue eyes. “And let you take care of Amefuri.”

—

“So, this is the area in which Kitora’s fang is most likely buried?”

Hyoushin stood in the entrance to the underground passageway,

frowning as he turned to glance at his Western guide for confirmation. It was later that day and, after a long trek through the dusty, unforgiving terrain, they had finally paused at a cracked cavern opening between the flanking slopes of one of the tallest mountains in the Kanin range.

“You are sure of that, Miramu? That this *is* the right area?”

“As sure as I can be, based on the little I know.” Miramu said frankly. “These mountains are associated with Byakko a lot in stupid children’s fairy stories that we all have to sit through as little kids. And this is the oldest and most remote area of the mountain range. Besides, I’m pretty sure that Toroki has come this way. Call it a gut instinct, if you like... but I have a feeling this is where we should be.”

“How would you know where Toroki is? It’s not like we’ve seen her.” Kayu frowned, and Miramu shrugged.

“I’m an assassin. When it comes to tracking prey, I have ways and means you wouldn’t understand.” He said evenly. “The important thing is that this is where we should begin. But there are multiple possible avenues — it’s a spider’s web, beneath the surface. This mountain is known as the Spider’s Peak, after all.”

“Kumo-zan.” Aoiketsu murmured. “I thought that was because it was so high... that it was called that because it looks like there are clouds brushing the peak.”

He cast Maichu a grin.

“I guess this is your home territory, then, isn’t it?” He reflected. “Spider’s Peak. Maybe it’s a good omen.”

“Shut up.” Maichu grimaced at him good-naturedly. “Just because *you* say my name means ‘dancing spider’ doesn’t mean it actually does, you know.”

“I think it’s fitting.” Kayu reflected. “You *are* like a spider, Maichu, when it comes to getting out of tight situations.”

“I think that there are other subjects of conversation more relevant to the current situation than that one.” Hyoushin said lightly, neatly preventing Maichu’s retort. “And we should be deciding on the best mode of attack. I think, if there are many possible passageways, the best thing will be to separate into smaller parties... all of you know well how to mark a trail to find your way back should you reach a dead end. We will separate, therefore... and meet back here before the sun sets over the Spider’s Peak.”

“If we’re underground, how will we know whether the sun is setting or not?” Maichu wondered, and Hyoushin arched an eyebrow.

“I would have thought all the training you’ve undergone over the years should answer that question.” He said evenly.

“We’re really going in there, sir?” Ouno asked apprehensively, and Hyoushin nodded.

“In pairs seems to be the best idea.” He agreed pragmatically. “Ouno, you and Kayu will take one path. Bouri and Jakou, you will take another. Aoiketsu and Maichu, you will take the third. As for the remainder...”

“You and your pretty ghost girl can have some time to yourselves.” Miramu interrupted, folding his arms across his chest. “If you’re going to make me go in there, it’s on the understanding that I work alone. Otherwise I won’t enter the caves at all.”

“Alone?” Hyoushin’s eyes narrowed. “And you think I have trust enough in you to find that a good idea?”

“I don’t care.” Miramu said evenly. “It’s the only way it’s going to happen, short of slitting my throat and carrying my corpse into the mountain.”

Hyoushin sighed, but he saw the steely resolution in the other man’s gaze and he nodded, realising that he had hit a brick wall.

“Very well.” He murmured. “But you are still acting for the Emperor of Kutou and if you wish him to pay you in full for your work, you will see it through to the end.”

“I have never done anything else.” Miramu assured him, bowing mockingly towards him. “You can have faith in that.”

“Which leaves me with you, Hyoushin-sama.” Suiko let out a delighted squeal, reaching out to grab Hyoushin’s hand, and the Meihi pulled away, sending her a faintly irritated look.

“You can stop that now.” He said evenly. “Or I will send *you* alone, too.”

“Mean Hyoushin.” Suiko pouted, folding her arms across her chest, and Hyoushin nodded.

“That’s right.” He agreed impassively. “And now it’s settled, let’s go. Remember, mark your way. And reconvene before sunset.”

As the group of travellers fanned out into the network of tunnels, Hyoushin paused, his gaze following Miramu until the assassin was no

longer visible. He frowned.

“That man is beyond my comprehension.” He murmured, and Suiko snorted.

“He’s a dusty, dirty westerner who likes blood.” She said frankly. “You shouldn’t spend so much time worrying about him, Hyoushin. I’m far more powerful than he is... if you want me to kill him, I will.”

“I do not wish to spill any blood on our travels if it can be at all avoided.” Hyoushin said pragmatically. “Irritating as Miramu is, I won’t stoop to his level. But the sooner we acquire the relic of Byakko, the better. We can return East, then... and try to discover a way to raise Kitora’s spirit.”

“He will have a way.” Suiko said disparagingly, and Hyoushin’s brows knitted together.

“By ‘he’, you mean Miramu.” He murmured, and Suiko nodded.

“Yes, so forget about him.” She said bluntly, slipping her arm into his as they made their way along the narrow corridor, the Meih marking their progress as they went.

“Will you not hang onto me like that, please?”

“I’m not hurting you.” Suiko pouted. “Why don’t you like me to touch you? Or don’t you like women at all, Mean Hyoushin? Is that why you don’t want me to touch you like this?”

“I have no interest in anything but the duty before me at present.” Hyoushin said evenly. “And you should be the same. You are not a woman, Suiko, however much you may like to think you are. You are an assumed form from a splinter of ancient magic. That being so, would you please stop trying to play the damsel in distress? It is most trying, and not a true reflection of your abilities. As you said, you are more powerful than we are... it would be far more useful if you could put that power to our cause a lot more readily.”

“You really are cold, hard, mean Hyoushin.” Suiko sighed. “Mage or not, I still have feelings, you know. Since I’ve assumed human form, I’ve taken other things along with it. And you could be nice to me. Then I might want to be more helpful.”

“I would be nicer to you if you stopped clinging to me.” Hyoushin responded impassively. “I do not like it, Suiko. Release me.”

Suiko frowned, but she obediently did as she was bidden.

“All right.” She muttered. “But you really are horrible to me. You’re

nicer to that assassin, even though you say you hate him.”

“Believe me, I would not have him within ten feet of me if his being here did not suit the Emperor’s purpose.” Hyoushin said pragmatically. “But there it is. I have my orders. And so do you.”

“Hyoushin, did that boy truly open the seal on my shrine?” Suiko asked quizzically.

“Boy?”

“Kaiga Aoiketsu. Is he truly the one who retrieved the holy scale?”

“Yes.” Hyoushin nodded. “Why? This troubles you?”

“No...” Suiko’s brows knitted together. “But I want to know... he has Seiryuu’s blood rushing through him. Is he... a Chosen one? He does not seem like one of Seiryuu’s people, and yet... there is something about him...”

“He is not a Celestial Warrior.” Hyoushin said frankly. “He is too old to be one reborn, and too young to be one in original form. Besides, Seiryuu’s people are dead.”

“No they’re not.” Suiko shook her head, and Hyoushin stared at her.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Not all of Seiryuu’s people are dead.” Suiko folded her arms, a flicker of satisfaction in her blue eyes at having some knowledge the composed Meihi did not know. “And now you want to know who and how, and what I mean, don’t you? Well, you should have listened to Suiko more clearly before, shouldn’t you? When she was in the flame. I couldn’t see as clearly then as I do now, it’s true. But Seiryuu trusted his treasure to two Seiryuu Seishi — both before and beyond the grave. You knew that, didn’t you?”

“Yes.” Hyoushin frowned. “And that means... one of Seiryuu’s original seven warriors still lives?”

“He does.” Suiko nodded her head triumphantly. “Your Emperor doesn’t know it, your pompous priest nor your dirty assassin. But I will tell *you* about it, Hyoushin. Because I like you. The one who wears the mark of Amiboshi lives in a village in the West of Hokkan. So now you know, don’t you?”

“This became futile information, once the Shinzahou was retrieved.” Hyoushin murmured. “But if Suzaku’s men knew this... they went there before us... they were aware of Amiboshi’s

existence?"

"I suppose so. I don't care for men of the south." Suiko shrugged emphatically. "Or what they do."

"You're somewhat singleminded sometimes." Hyoushin reflected. Suiko nodded her head.

"Yes." She agreed, as if she was proud of this fact. "I am Seiryuu-sama's servant, and that is all. I have no time for those who serve the Tiger or the Phoenix. I only care about the Dragon. But you can't lecture me, Hyoushin. You don't care about any of the Gods at all. You only care to fulfill Kintsusei-sama's wishes... don't you?"

"As you say." Hyoushin agreed. "Which is why we're here. If we are able to locate the Shrine, Suiko, do you think your magic will be able to break through the seal?"

"It's not Byakko's magic." Suiko shook her head. "It's not the right key for the lock."

"Then we will indeed need to find Toroki, if she has come this way." Hyoushin's eyes narrowed. "I do not know how to do that, or to force her compliance without causing her severe harm. Miramu's cooperation relies on us sparing that girl's life — whatever his reasoning is, killing her is not an option. But..."

He paused, as the mage stopped dead, her eyes widening with surprise.

"Suzaku!" She breathed, and Hyoushin sent her a startled look.

"Suzaku?" He murmured. "What do you mean?"

"You seek treasures, Hyoushin-sama?" Suiko turned to him, her eyes glittering excitedly. "Something here is giving off the same heretic aura as that mirror you took from the girl in the cave yesterday. Something near here. Suzaku's taint..."

She faltered, and Hyoushin's eyes widened as he registered the implications of what she was saying.

"You're saying... Suzaku's Shinzahou... is *here*?" He murmured. "In Sairou? That of all places, Suzaku hid it *here*?"

"I don't pretend to know how that bird thinks." Suiko said disdainfully. "But I can smell the magic of Suzaku somewhere in these caves."

"Nearby?"

“Yes. Very nearby.” Suiko hesitated, then she grimaced, rolling her eyes. “And that girl is here too. The one who had the mirror.”

“Toroki.” Hyoushin’s brows twitched together, then, “Very well. We seek her, Suiko. If we discover Suzaku’s treasure, we will take it. But our priority here is Toroki and the fang of Byakko. Which direction are we heading?”

“This way.” Suiko indicated. “Follow me... it’s not far along this corridor.”

“I suppose your powers of detection are more defined underground, away from the hot sun.” Hyoushin observed, and Suiko snorted, shaking her head.

“I sense the vibrations in the water of this place.” She said frankly. “That’s all. The water flows and brushes things, and then it tells me its story. It’s touched the hand of Toroki and the magic of Suzaku in this cave. I don’t know what that means. But I know it’s true.”

“Water does not usually speak, Suiko.”

“Not to *you*, maybe.” Suiko retorted. “*I’m* a little different in that respect. And besides, I’m being helpful, aren’t I? I’m being nice? So you can be nice to me, too.”

“All right. I suppose you are being helpful.” Hyoushin sighed. “Lead the way.”

“No further, Hyoushin of Kutou.”

Before they could get much further along the passage, however, a familiar figure confronted them in the opening of the chamber ahead, an angry look in her seiran eyes as she cast him a cold, unwelcoming look.

“This is not a place for people such as you to trespass.” She murmured. “This is sacred land — you have no business being here.”

“This is quite another attitude from the last time we met, Toroki.” Hyoushin gathered his wits, eying her thoughtfully. “The last time we spoke, you did not see much point in properly trying to fight Kutou’s will. Are you foolish enough to try to this time? You know what we seek... will you give us the mirror, but deny us Byakko’s fang?”

“You should be happy with what you’ve got.” Myoume said softly. “Kitora’s shrine is sealed to all but those chosen by Byakko. And I will not help you to open it.”

“I don’t wish to harm you.” Hyoushin said quietly, and Myoume

snorted.

“You need my blood to release the seal, so that’s a lie to begin with.” She said flatly. “I see many things, Hyoushin of Kutou. And I remember every face of every person I ever meet. The last time we encountered one another, your witch friend here called on the water in the mountain caves to disable me. But I didn’t fight you, then. This time... I may. If you don’t leave here.”

“What are you protecting?” Hyoushin murmured. “Did you give me Byakko’s Shinzahou in order to prevent me from finding out that Suzaku’s magic also has some basis in Sairou?”

“Suzaku?” Myoume stared at him for a moment, and Suiko pulled a graphic face in the Seishi’s direction.

“I can smell it.” She said disdainfully. “Dirty bird magic and dirty tiger magic. In this horrible dusty place.”

“Myoume, what’s going on?” A voice behind the Seishi caught Hyoushin’s attention at that moment, and the Meihi was aware of a young girl of about fourteen or fifteen, who suddenly stopped as she saw the strangers before her. Behind her came two others, both armed with swords and, from their attire, they were clearly aligned with some kind of bandit group. Hyoushin’s eyes narrowed as he realised what this meant.

“Suzaku’s people.” He murmured. “You ally yourselves with bandits from Reikaku-zan, Toroki? Villains from the Southern lands... is Sairou then taking a political stance in matters it has no involvement in?”

“A political stance?” Myoume shook her head. “No. This is not about politics. It’s a spiritual stance, if anything else. I’m not working for Kounan, nor am I helping Kutou. I want to protect this world — to protect Sairou. You have dark alliances, Hyoushin of Kutou. And whilst you keep them, I won’t even speak to you of compromise or help. He is here — I can feel his life force running through the passages, although he seeks to conceal himself from me.”

Hyoushin frowned, confused.

“I don’t understand.” He admitted. “But I do have Imperial orders to be here. Whether you find my presence distasteful or not is irrelevant. I must act according to the Lord Kintsusei’s wishes. And he wishes to possess the Shinzahou and the fang of Kitora. You must know where the shrine is hidden... it would be easier for you and for Sairou to let us take what we came for and then leave. We wish to

cause as little trouble as possible, but Kutou is in dire need of these things.”

“Dire need.” One of the bandits snorted. “You mean that your King is a greedy son of a bitch who wants to take control of everything he can reach? Kutou’s full of disease and civil war, everyone knows that... you can’t walk down the street without the risk of a neighbour stabbing you in the back. Why would anyone trust your people? After what your Shougun Nakago did to Kounan in the last war — why would anyone want to help Kutou at all?”

“Shut up, Shishi.” The other bandit said quietly. “This is Myoume’s business. Not ours.”

“It is.” Myoume agreed. “Jin, take Hikari and Shishi and take them above ground. It grows later — the moon has not risen yet, and if this place is no longer a safe haven for you, I won’t have you below ground any longer. Take them both and wait for me... go back the way we first came and take the second left and third right. It will lead you to a sheltered place where you will be safe. I will take care of everything here.”

“But...” The girl called Hikari protested. “We can’t just leave you on your own!”

“I’ve been on my own a long time.” Myoume said softly. “Please, Hikari. Go with Jin. Go together. I’ll join you soon, I promise... just go.”

There was a moment of uncertainty then, as Hyoushin watched, the older bandit grabbed both the girls by the arms, pulling them firmly back into the chamber beyond. As they disappeared, Myoume stepped forwards, slipping her glove from her hand as the character glittered forbiddingly against her skin.

“Turn back, Hyoushin of Kutou.” She whispered. “This is not a place for you. This chamber has been blessed by Byakko and the safe retreat of his Seishi for a century or more. I won’t have it tainted by the presence of thieves.”

“You truly are a different person today.” Hyoushin murmured. “What has effected this transformation? Is it because I now have possession of your treasure?”

He patted the bag at his waist, and Toroki’s eyes narrowed.

“I knew you had brought it here.” She murmured. “But I’m more concerned by the pact you’ve made with my older brother to bring you here.”

“Your... brother.” Hyoushin spoke the words slowly, understanding in an instant who she meant, and why Miramu had been so emphatic about avoiding contact with the Byakko Seishi. A faint smile touched his lips.

“Well, well. Geiyo Miramu is your brother? This is an interesting and unexpected turn of events.”

“Yes, he is.” Myoume agreed softly. “He’s the reason you came to my cave. The reason you’re here now. He’s been following me, just as I’ve been following him. It’s a game of cat and mouse. Yet you seek me out... why would you do that? Why would you need Toroki, Hyoushin of Kutou?”

She frowned, and Hyoushin saw a glitter of frustration in her indigo eyes.

“Why is it that you and I are fated to keep crossing paths?” She whispered. “I don’t understand it — I just know that we are.”

“Hyoushin is mine, not yours, you nasty tiger-worshipper.” Suiko said darkly, but Hyoushin ignored her, folding his arms across his chest.

“You’re the prophet. You can surely answer your own questions.” He said evenly. “Though you cannot be ignorant of why I need your help... your blood to open the seal, as you’ve already said. You are the one with the key... and I must unlock the door.”

“You already have the key.” Myoume said coldly. “If you’re too much of a fool to know it, then that’s your problem. I won’t release the seal on Kitora’s cave except to take the treasure to a safer place than here.”

She brushed her fingers together, closing her eyes as she ran the blazing white mark against her own skin. As she did so, a flare of whiteish magic shimmered up around her fingers, and as she thrust her hand forwards, Hyoushin found himself knocked back off his feet by a wave of disorientating psychic energy. As his thoughts swirled, he struggled to get his bearings, even as he heard Suiko call his name.

“I can hurt you worse than that, if you come any closer to me.” The Seishi flexed her fingers. “Drawing on my own energy has limits. Drawing on yours gives me no such boundaries. The next time, Hyoushin, I will take your thoughts and your memories and I will drown you in them until you no longer know who you are or where you’re going. Do you understand, now, what Toroki is? She is not someone you can mess with lightly.”

Hyoushin struggled to re-assemble his thoughts, staring at her as he remembered fleetingly Miramu's words about Toroki's power.

"Like brother, like sister." He murmured, and Myoume's eyes narrowed. She shook her head.

"I pray not." She murmured. "My brother would kill you now. I will let you live. But trespass further into Byakko's territory, and you will regret it. You bear the slave's tattoo on your cheek, Hyoushin — I'm sure that if I was to brush my finger against your skin, I'd find plenty of ammunition to knock you out of your senses for a week. Don't take the threat idly... just because I'm a woman doesn't make me weak. Just because I let you take the Shinzahou, it does not mean I am colluding with Kutou or that I support your actions. And if I have my way, you will not get to the shrine of Kitora first."

With that she was gone, disappearing into the chamber as Hyoushin struggled to his feet, pushing away the hand Suiko offered him in assistance.

"I'm all right." He managed, half-wondering if he truly was, for for the briefest of instants his mind had been flooded with fragments of thousands of thoughts and memories, none of which had made any sense. He shook his head as if to clear it, rubbing his temples. "What witchcraft was that? Was it what Miramu said — that she truly can bring people to madness with such a power?"

His eyes narrowed.

"And if so, why did she let us take the Shinzahou so readily?" He murmured. "If she is such a strong adversary, why did she put up no fight at all?"

"Are you all right?" Suiko flitted around him anxiously, and Hyoushin nodded.

"I'm fine." He agreed. "You were unaffected by her magic?"

"She didn't aim at me, but I doubt something as nasty and kittenish as that girl would have had any effect on me." Suiko shrugged. "It's dirty magic. That's all."

"It's certainly not the most pleasant thing to have thrown at you." Hyoushin frowned. "And I do not wish to experience it again."

"Suzaku's taint has gone, Hyoushin." Suiko said softly. "Those children took it away with them. Do you want me to go after them? There was something about the one called Hikari that interested me — shall I hunt them for you, and bring them back with me? Would it

make you happy, if I did that?"

"No..." Hyoushin frowned, then he shook his head. "We can ill afford war with Kounan at present, Suiko... we do not have the strength to defend against them at this time. And if they do indeed have a connection to Suzaku... well, it will have to wait until we're able to go into Kounan, I think. But that you sensed it... that's good to know. I certainly won't forget about it... it will stand further investigation, so do not forget their names."

"I won't." Suiko promised.

"More immediately, we've discovered something about our assassin that he's kept a secret." Hyoushin added. "Something that might be useful at some future point. Toroki is his sister."

"So what do we do now?" Suiko demanded. "Are we running away? Giving up?"

"No. We continue our search." Hyoushin hesitated, then he brushed his finger against the cloth bag that hung at his waist.

"She said we already had the key to the shrine, without her help." He murmured. "The only thing I can think of that she means is the Shinzahou, although I don't understand her logic in giving it to me if that's the case. Still, it is Byakko's. So it's worth a try. We keep searching for Kitora's shrine... after all, the Emperor is relying on us to retrieve these things on his behalf. Byakko Seishi or not, I will not let him down."

Chapter 12

Chapter Eleven

“How much longer are we going to run for?”

As the trio of Southern travellers hurried through the underground trackways, it was Shishi who first voiced the question, darting around fallen shards of stone as they climbed higher and higher towards the mountain surface. “Hey, Jin, are you listening to me? How much longer are we going to hide like cowards?”

“Myoume... told us to go.” Jin said grimly, as he took the next turning, following the twisting tunnel as he thought in the distance he could see the flicker of fading light in the evening sky. “Stop arguing, and save your breath. This is her business... not ours.”

“Don’t be so stupid.” Shishi snapped. “She’s on her own with... what the hell was that woman, anyway? Some kind of... ghost?”

“I think... she must have been... Seiryuu’s mage spirit.” Hikari gasped out, as they finally reached the surface, the schoolgirl collapsing on the warm sandy ground as she struggled to catch her breath. “Dammit, the pair of you, how could you go so fast? You know I’m not as quick as... as you are!”

“Are you all right?” Jin shot her an anxious look, unhooking his gourd from his belt as he held it out to her. “Here. Sorry. I wanted to get us above ground before it was dark, so we could at least see our surroundings before we thought about what we’re going to do.”

“Well, what are we going to do?” Hikari took a sip of the water, sitting back as she cast the two bandits quizzical looks. “Are we going to wait for Myoume here, like she told us?”

“I guess she wants to fight this herself.” Jin said softly. “When you were washing, she told me that she didn’t want us in Kitora’s shrine. That it was important to her. So that’s why we’ve come this way. This is Byakko’s... she wants to do it her way.”

“But that man...” Shishi faltered. “And the woman — if she’s really a mage, that means she’s got some of Seiryuu’s power, doesn’t it?”

“Something like that.” Hikari agreed, handing the gourd back as she did so. “She did look funny... like some kind of water witch, or spirit, or... I don’t know. And the guy with her... what did Myoume

call him? Something that began with an H...”

“Hyoushin.” Jin took a sip of the water himself, handing it to Shishi who took it gratefully. “That’s what she said. Hyoushin of Kutou.”

“Hyoushin.” Hikari repeated. “Is there any reason we should know that name?”

“Guess not, because I don’t.” Shishi frowned. “But he... Jin, do you think he... is he one of those tribespeople? The ones who live in their own little settlements and speak their own language? The ones who hate violence and don’t even have proper weapons because they don’t believe in fighting?”

“Well, I guess he’s not a very good example, if he is.” Jin said ruefully. “A Meihi, you mean? Maybe. I guess he did look like he was — but I thought they were pretty much wiped out by the former Kutou Emperor.”

“That one didn’t seem to be too bothered about Emperors and slaughter. He had Kutou’s crest on his armour. He’s in Kintsusei’s pocket and he more or less said as much.” Shishi said frankly. “Tribal or not, he ain’t really the peaceful type, that’s for sure.”

“What’s a Meihi, please?” Hikari looked confused. “A tribe of people who don’t fight? But...?”

“Once, when we were in the market in Souun, gathering supplies, there was some kind of performance going on in the square.” Jin reflected, leaning up against the stone face of the mountain as he did so. “I must’ve been about ten or eleven — it was one of the first trips I took into the city on bandit business, an’ it was in the midst of some festival or other, so it was busy as hell. The performers were from a travelling circus or somethin’ — they had acrobats like Anzu-sama used t’be, so we stopped t’watch them.”

“I think I remember.” Shishi frowned, her brows knitting together as she pondered it. “I wanted to see the people tumble and perform like Okaa-san, so I begged and begged Pa... Kashira to let us stop for a while. And he did.”

“You were only with us because you snuck out after us an’ Kashira didn’t want your Ma to find out you’d done it on your own.” Jin shot her a rueful look. “So he made you promise that if you watched the circus, you wouldn’t tell her you’d snuck out one of the tunnels.”

“That’s right.” Shishi grinned. “He told Kaa-san that he took me to see the circus, later. I remember more clearly now.”

“In any case, one of the performers was... I guess, *silver* was the only word for it.” Jin mused. “They were an Eastern troupe, and this old guy was probably a slave — he sure as hell seemed like it, the way he was treated. He was pretty much there as an attraction in himself — he performed strange music for the crowd an’ when he made a wrong note, the master of the circus brought his whip out an’ whipped him. The reason I remember all this is because Kashira was took exception to the whip...”

He smiled faintly.

“You don’t mess with Kashira when he’s pissed off.” He added. “The man with the whip found himself a few new bruises an’ the circus found themselves evicted from Souun with Reikaku-zan’s people relievin’ them of a hefty amount of toll. But this silver guy... he went with them. They took him... even though he could’ve taken his chance to escape, I guess he had no hope or soul left in him. He just did as he was bidden. That’s all.”

“That’s so sad.” Hikari bit her lip. “And he looked like that Hyoushin guy?”

“Well, he had the same colouring. I wouldn’t say they looked alike.” Jin shook his head. “But Aniki told us he was a Meihi — silver hair and amethyst eyes. They’re snow-people... they come from the northern Hokkan mountains or somethin’ like that. An’ I guess that Hyoushin guy was born one of them — whatever the hell he is now. He looked like he might be pretty ready with a sword, though — with all that armour, I’d say he’s somethin’ of a hotshot in Kutou’s armed forces.”

“Another reason we shouldn’t just abandon Myoume, surely?” Shishi pointed out. “Even if we keep away from the shrine place, there must be somethin’ we can do to help. We don’t even know how many Kutou people there are... she could be facin’ the entire damn army as far as we’re concerned.”

“True.” Jin murmured, gazing up at the sky. “But the sun is about to set. The moon... it will soon be night time.”

“So?” Shishi looked blank, and Hikari frowned.

“Myoume did say... that the moon would be up soon and we should stay here.” She remembered.

“So maybe we should do as she says, huh?”

“I think we should go and help Myoume out.” Shishi shook his head. “Why are you so reticent, Jin? This ain’t like you!”

“It’s not important.” Jin shook his head. “And besides, Myoume has a point. Shishi, you and I, we have to protect Hikari. I won’t say why, not when anyone could be listening — but you know it as well as I do. That’s our role, just as she has hers. And Myoume is a Seishi. She’s like Chichiri and your father... she’s stronger than we are. We have to let her fight Byakko’s battles too.”

“But she’s our friend, now.” Shishi said stubbornly. “Ain’t she? Didn’t she lead us here, too?”

“I agree with Shishi.” Hikari said unevenly. “Hyoushin and his men could really hurt her, and she doesn’t have the Shinzahou to heighten her power. We can’t just leave her... can we?”

“Myoume said...” Jin faltered, but Hikari could tell by his expression that he was not sure himself, and she sighed, getting to her feet.

“There’s no way we can go back and take them by surprise?” She asked hopefully. “Distract them, perhaps? Or even... even take the fang, while Myoume is busy. Then we can give it to her, and it will be all right. Won’t it?”

“The fang...” Jin’s brow creased as he thought this over, and Hikari saw his gaze stray to the sky above their heads. He shook his head.

“Myoume was adamant that we weren’t to go near Kitora’s shrine if we could help it.” He responded.

“I guess it’s sacred.” Shishi sighed. “All right. Then what can we do?”

“Maybe we could... try and get the Shinzahou?” Hikari suggested. Jin stared at her.

“The Shinzahou?”

“Well... I don’t know for sure, but I think... the ghost man, the Meihi. I think he has it.” Hikari shrugged. “And if Myoume’s going to the shrine — to a place that guy can’t get into — he won’t be there. Will he? So if we found him, and took him off guard... mightn’t we be able to steal it away? You two are bandits, after all. You must know some sneak tricks, and I don’t mind playing mind games with some guy who’s just come here to cause us trouble.”

Jin was silent for a moment. Then, he nodded.

“You’re right.” He acknowledged. “If we did that... if we could grab the Shinzahou, then we’d have at least achieved something we came here to do. And if they came after us, we could lead them out here. If

we could get them out in the open, we might have a better chance of fighting them — that cave is dark and it's easy to hide but it's not so simple to do that in a place like this. And as you say, Hikari, we're bandits. We know a few sneak tactics."

"Then we're going back in?" Shishi demanded. Jin hesitated, then he nodded, brushing his fingers against the hilt of his sword.

"I guess so." He agreed. "And hope Myoume forgives us for interfering. This is, after all, her fight... an' I know how Kashira'd feel, if someone barged in on his."

"Kashira is stronger than Myoume." Shishi said firmly. "She's not the same as he is. She might be Toroki, but she was only there to guard the Shinzahou. She's not there to protect a Miko — not like Father was. When he was born to be Tasuki, it was to defend Suzaku no Miko and raise Suzaku over Kounan's skies. In comparison, Myoume's just a guard on sentry duty. It ain't the same deal. An' like Hiki said, she could get hurt."

"Well, we have the element of surprise." Jin said heavily. "All right."

He hesitated, then he took Hikari by the hand, and she was surprised by the sudden solemnity in his gaze.

"Even so, it'll be dangerous in there." He said softly. "Listen. If we're separated, don't worry about me. I'll take care of things — it will be all right. An' I won't let anythin' happen to you. So don't panic an' worry about me, all right? I'm a bandit, an' I can fight my corner."

"Jin?" Hikari looked startled, a faint chill touching her heart at his expression. "Why? What do you mean?"

Jin gazed at her for a moment. Then he pulled her close to him, kissing her gently, and at first too surprised to resist, Hikari did nothing to pull away. As her thoughts returned to normal order, however, she pulled back, staring at him in disbelief.

"Jin, what are you..."

"I'm sorry." Jin touched his lips, slowly shaking his head. "I can't explain, and you can get mad — after this is over, you can yell at me all you like. All right? But I... just once... I'm sorry. I know it's wrong, but..."

"I..." Hikari faltered, lost for words, and Shishi sighed, rolling her eyes expressively.

"Yeesh, the pair of you, get a room already!" She exclaimed,

tapping her blade against the stone impatiently. “Are we going or are we makin’ out? Geez!”

“We’re going.” Jin said softly, and Hikari saw his gaze flit to the sky one last time. “Right now. After you, Shishi... try an’ keep as quiet as you can. We want to take ’em all by surprise, if we possibly can.”

“You don’t need to tell me.” Shishi tossed her head. “I did train on the same mountain as you, you know.”

With that she disappeared into the tunnel once more, and Jin squeezed Hikari’s hand, offering her a faint smile.

“Before we go after her...” He said softly, and Hikari frowned, eying him in confusion.

“Jin?”

“I just want you to know something.” Jin faltered, then he shrugged his shoulders. “Hell, an’ I’ll jus’ say it, since there doesn’t seem to be a fancy way. I really am protectin’ you because you’re Hikari, that’s all. I guess I’m realisin’...that’s a damn important thing to do, for a lot of reasons — but in my eyes, that’s still who you are. Hikari. An’ it’s all I want you to be.”

“What’s gotten into you all of a sudden?” Hikari demanded, and Jin shook his head.

“Later, we’ll talk.” He said briefly. “If we can, we’ll talk a lot. But the things I said before... I meant them then an’ I do now. All right? Even if you do want to go back to your world — it’s all right. It don’t change anythin’. I give. Even if we’re not the same... I still... you know. I can’t help it, and I’m not going to fight it... whatever you feel for me, I’m in love with you and I want you to know that means whatever happens in there — with that ghost or whatever else — I’ll do whatever it takes to protect you. So... don’t be scared of him or anythin’. I promise... I’ll take care of you.”

“Why are you saying all this now?” Hikari flushed, eying him in embarrassment. “Jin, you have the weirdest timing, I swear.”

“I know.” Jin looked haunted. “But I jus’...wanted you to hear it. That’s all. Now let’s go.”

Hikari frowned, but she had no chance to argue, because he tugged her by the arm, ducking into the tunnel as he pulled her in behind him. There was a tight tension to his grip and to his demeanour as they headed back into the blackness, and silence seemed to hang heavy in the air following the bandit’s awkward, heartfelt confession.

Jin pursed his lips, inwardly making up his mind.

“We’ll try and avoid the shrine.” He murmured. “I ain’t forgotten, Myoume. I ain’t forgotten any of what you said. An’ shit, I’m scared, doin’ this. But I ain’t a coward. I’ll see it through. If we tackle Hyoushin, then we’re not facin’ any Amefuri. An’ you said it so specifically... besides, I ain’t someone who runs away and abandons friends when they might need help. And more’n anything, I’ll protect Hikari.”

He swallowed hard, nodding resolutely as he accepted the gamble he had taken.

“I know how Kashira felt now, defendin’ Suzaku no Miko.” He realised. “An’ I’m starting to feel the same way. To realise... my life is small. It’s insignificant, even if I’d really like t’hold onto it. If anythin’ happens to her, though, the whole of this world — will it even survive, if somethin’ happens to Hikari? If it did, we’d all die anyway. So if I can prevent what Myoume saw, I will. But if it comes to it — I won’t run away. I’ll see it through, whatever the outcome.”

He narrowed his eyes.

“Whatever the cost!”

So, for better or worse, this was it.

Miramu paused outside the entrance to Byakko’s shrine, biting his lip thoughtfully as he considered his best plan of action. From the flicker at the back of his senses, he knew that Toroki was not far from the fang’s location herself, and inwardly he cursed, realising that he had only one course of action left open to him.

He slipped his fingers into his belt, pulling his small dagger out and glancing at it, before shrugging his shoulders.

“Pain makes you alive, and nothing comes without it. Isn’t that what they say?” He murmured, as he drew the blade down cleanly and purposefully across his palm, watching as the hot red blood gushed from the gaping wound. Then, with a sigh, he re-sheathed his weapon, pressing the hand down hard against the seal that held the door to the inner sanctum firmly locked.

“Curse Byakko.” He muttered, as the hard, gritty surface caused the fresh injury to sting and burn. *“Curse him for forcing me down this path.”*

As the words left his lips, the door shuddered into life, and he drew

his hand back, watching with mixed satisfaction as the heavy divide rumbled back to reveal the shrine within. It was untouched, and he realised with some relief that it had been that way for some time.

The chamber was round in shape, and in the centre stood the proud, erect figure of the hunting cat, his head raised and his fangs bared as if warning intruders against trespassing into Byakko's holy territory. His front left paw was raised, shielding a white bone chest, and the skill and devotion of the carver was evident in the detail applied to each claw that held the box firmly in place. Across the curved walls were the delicate, brightly painted images of the white tiger hunting in the scrubland of Sairou, but despite the overall vivacity of the designs, the entire chamber was coated in the dust of the desert, and Miramu snorted, taking a malicious amount of pleasure at its seemingly neglected appearance.

"It's probably not been opened since the fang was first sealed here." He murmured, stepping into the chamber as he pulled a length of fabric from his belt, tearing it across and binding it tightly around his injured hand to stem the bleeding. "So much to the better. Myoume hasn't been here yet."

He ran a casual finger against the looming marble statue of the white tiger, staring up at the beast's glassy, glittering eyes with derision.

"You don't scare me." He said softly. "You can bare your teeth at me and hiss and claw all you like. You can't possibly make my life any more miserable than you already have, Byakko. So I'm here. Are you happy? I've come and acknowledged my blood for the first time in ten years. And for all that I've suffered, I demand repayment. I'm going to take your fang and I'm going to give it to Sairou's enemies. That will teach you to betray me... now won't it?"

He frowned, pursing his lips as memories flickered across his senses.

"To betray me and to betray my sister, too." He murmured. "You truly are the root of evil in this land. And I don't care if your power is ripped out of it. Let it be. You've done nothing but cause me pain... why should I treat you any differently?"

"Stop right there!"

The voice came so suddenly that for the briefest of instants Miramu thought it had come from the looming cat figure and it took him a minute to realise that in fact the shout had come from behind him, from where the door of the shrine was still gaping open. He swung

around, his eyes narrowing as he took in the indignant figures in the doorway, his quick gaze flitting over each of them as he recognised them in turn.

“Well.” he said smoothly, gathering his composure as he folded his arms across his chest. “If it isn’t Suzaku’s little folk.”

“I knew something stank in here.” The red-head, whom Miramu knew was Tasuki’s daughter spat out. “I guess it was you. You have a nerve, coming in here like this. What do you think you’re going to do now — are there no depths you don’t sink to?”

“Seldom few.” Miramu admitted. “But they don’t concern you. And nor do my actions. This is no place for children — you’d do better to leave.”

His gaze rested on Hikari, and he smiled.

“*You* had a little sense, the last time we met.” He murmured. “Maybe you should use that this time, Hikari-chan... and take your hot-blooded companion out the way you came.”

“The last time we met, you had a little girl scared and in tears.” Hikari said coldly. “I did what I had to to make sure she was safe. But she’s not here now. And I don’t have to play by your rules. You might think it’s okay, running around and stealing treasures... maybe you don’t have any respect for the Beast Gods. But you’ve gone too far this time. This place... this is Byakko’s shrine, isn’t it? You’ve broken into the holy place where Byakko’s fang is sealed, and that’s beyond forgiving.”

“Broken into?” Miramu’s eyebrows twitched up, and his smile widened. “You stand on the threshold, Hikari of the south, flanked by mountain bandits from Reikaku-zan, by their looks... and you tell me *I’m* a thief and a trespasser? That I have no right to stand in Byakko’s holy place and exchange words with the Beast God?”

“Damn right.” The young man said quietly, and despite the resolution in his tones, Miramu detected faint apprehension in his stance. “What you did to Meikyo was inhuman. And this fang belongs to Byakko’s people. To Toroki. It’s nothing to do with you.”

“I’d say it’s less to do with you.” Miramu countered. “I was at least born in this land — which can’t be said for any of you, I’m sure.”

“Born in...?” The redhead stared at this. “You mean *you’re* from Sairou?”

“Well deduced, wolf cub.” Miramu smirked. “Which gives me more

of a right to be here than you. Or am I mistaken, when I assume you belong to Tasuki of Reikaku-zan — the daughter of Suzaku's flame-throwing Seishi, and therefore a child of Kounan?"

"I'm Shishi. I don't belong to my father... I'm my *own* bandit." The girl said hotly. "And it's not important where I was born. We're here to help Toroki. You're here to steal something. There's the difference. *You're* a low life creep who hurt my cousin and I'm not going to forgive that so easily."

"I don't really care about your forgiveness." Miramu was amused. "But you have your father's fire running through you. Shishi, is it? A *lion* cub, then, not a wolf? No matter. The same applies. You three have no business being here. Leave, before I make you regret that you came."

"You leave." Jin said softly, his fingers straying to his sword. "Before we make *you*."

Miramu stared at him for a moment, then he began to laugh. Slowly he shook his head.

"You are very, very stupid." He said derisively. "Did it not occur to you that perhaps I belong here far more than you do? That maybe I managed to get in here because, at the end of the day, I'm *supposed* to be able to? That *you* are the ones trespassing? You are the potential thieves — not me. Even if you come with Toroki's blessing, you are not Sairou's children and you are not Celestial Warriors. Your blood is nothing to this cave or this Tiger... nothing at all."

He tilted his head on one side, surveying them for a moment. Then, very carefully he reached up with his good hand to unloop the thick leather collar from around his throat. Hikari let out a gasp, her hand flying to her mouth as colour drained from her features, and Shishi cursed, her eyes widening in disbelief as the flesh of his neck became exposed. He nodded, lifting an idle finger to brush against the blazing white character that burned against his skin.

"As you can see, I'm *both*." He murmured. "Did I neglect to share that information with you on our last encounter? So sorry."

He bowed mockingly towards them, raising his head as cold humour glittered in his gem-like eyes.

"My name is Amefuri." He said softly. "Celestial Warrior of Byakko, Guardian of the Shinzahou and Protector of the Shrine of the Fang."

"Amefuri..." Shishi whispered. "Shit... you... *you're* Amefuri? *You?* All along, you were..."

“So that’s how you got back to the Eastern Village before we did. And how you concealed yourself from Chichiri-san’s senses.” Jin said slowly, his brows knitting together in consternation, and Miramu saw him shoot Hikari a sidelong, almost protective glance. “You used whatever powers Byakko gave you.”

“You’re very sharp.” The assassin nodded his head. “Toroki can see all things. Me, I can conceal myself from the sight of others. I can suppress my life force to the point where even a gifted sorcerer such as Suzaku’s Chichiri cannot sense me. Why do you think I am so good at my chosen trade? And to get to your Eastern Village, I used another power. When my energy is suppressed, I can transfer myself short distances whilst invisible. It’s not the most ideal form of transport, and I won’t claim to be as talented as your Ri Hou Jun is at shifting across time and space. But it has its uses.”

“But that’s crazy!” Hikari gathered her wits, staring at him incredulously. “If that’s true, why are you trying to *hurt* us? Why is it... why are you and Toroki at odds with one another? Why are you acting like this — for Kutou? I don’t understand!”

“Because I *hate* Byakko.” Miramu said simply, looping his collar once more around his throat and fastening the ties firmly. “Simple as that. I despise Celestial slavery, and I won’t pander to an overgrown housecat who forced me into this world in the first place.”

He shrugged.

“My motives don’t matter.” He added evenly. “The truth is that, by the will of that cursed kitty, I have the power to take Byakko’s fang from this place. To unite it with the Shinzahou from Suzuno-sama, Byakko no Miko, and raise the power of the Western mage from her sleep. Whatever my will, you cannot contest that fact. I have the blood of Amefuri running through my veins. Whether you hate me or not — whether you consider me evil or not — this is my birthright.”

He ran his tongue thoughtfully over the tips of his teeth as he pondered.

“And I suppose, as a Celestial Warrior, I am allowed to kill to defend the Tiger’s treasure.” He said ironically. “Fitting, don’t you think so, for an assassin like me?”

His fingers stretched towards his quiver, but even as he unhooked his bow from his back, something came hurtling out of the air towards him, knocking the carved implement out of his hands and sending it clattering across the stone floor towards the painted panel walls.

He frowned, turning to stare at the trio as he realised that the boy among them had drawn a dagger from his belt, and that this weapon was now embedded neatly in the wood of his bow, pinning it against the wood-panelled imagery that seemed to mock him from all angles. He frowned, anger flickering inside of him as he registered the determination in the young man's gaze.

"We didn't intend to come here, but since we're here, we're not going to run away." Jin said quietly. "We want the fang too, and since you've let us in, there are three of us and one of you. There's no reason why we shouldn't take it. I might not be a Seishi, but I'm a damn good aim. You were lucky that wasn't your head — that I ain't as bloodthirsty as you are."

"Strong words." A faint smile twisted around the edges of Miramu's mouth at this audacity. "All right. I don't need my arrows to defend myself against children, anyway. Three of you is nothing. You have no idea what I'm capable of."

"No..." Hikari's eyes widened, and she shook her head. "Jin, we can't fight him! We can't fight Amefuri! Taiitsukun said it — we can't!"

"Taiitsukun?" Miramu arched an eyebrow. "The old fraud who claims to control this world? Do you come here on *her* orders, then?"

His eyes narrowed, as he crossed the floor, eying Hikari curiously.

"How is it *you've* spoken to Taiitsukun, Hikari-chan?" He asked softly. "What magic made that possible? A spell from your Chichiri, or maybe... something else?"

"Don't you dare touch Hiki!" Shishi exclaimed. "You do and I'll slice your head off — I don't care if Jin's too nice to do it. I'm not!"

"I'm sure you'll be quite frightening one day, screaming threats like that... if you get the chance to grow up and do it as an adult." Miramu cast her a disparaging look. "You have a lot to learn about knowing your enemy, though. Besides, you're being rude. I've not touched anyone, yet. I only asked Hikari here a question. She's met the fabled Taiitsukun — I wonder how that's possible?"

Hikari folded her arms defiantly across her chest.

"It's none of your business." She snapped. "I won't tell you anything."

"What if I was to offer you your life, in return for your answer?" Miramu asked softly, and for a moment he thought he saw a flicker of

fear in the young girl's eyes. "This place is Byakko's. It's said to be sacred. You really shouldn't be here. I could make you all sacrifices to the Beast God who mocks me... stain his chamber in the blood of the South... but I'm interested to know your secrets, Hikari. You came to protect that child in the village... like you would walk through fire to protect her, without any fear of me at all. And now... now I find you've met the one who only those Chosen by the Gods can meet. Who *are* you, really? One of Suzaku's Seishi reborn? That would be a coup, wouldn't it? If I'd hidden my sign from you, and you from me."

"I'm not a Suzaku Shichi Seishi." Hikari shook her head. "I'm Hikari. That's all. I guess Taiitsukun's just such a good buddy of Chichiri and Tasuki's that she came to see me."

"Not possible." Miramu's eyes narrowed. "Do you think I don't know the legends about that hag, who takes the form of the most bizarre beings she can in order to hide her true nature? I was raised with Byakko in every corner of my life. Till I was fourteen, being Amefuri was all that seemed important to the ones around me. I'm not a fool, so don't take me for one. At least give me credit for knowing something about the things in which I've invested so much hatred over the past ten years."

"You're a sicko." Shishi told him bluntly, drawing her sword as she held it at her side. "If you're just going to babble, get out of the way. Myoume'll be here soon, and..."

"Myoume." Miramu frowned, as something flickered across his senses. "Toroki. Yes. You're right, which means I don't have time for this."

He pursed his lips, then, with a lightning quick movement, he reached out his uninjured hand, grabbing Hikari and pulling her close to him, his glittering silver dagger pressed up against her throat.

"Hikari!" Jin let out an exclamation, and Miramu laughed, shaking his head.

"I don't just use a bow and arrow. I'm an expert in many different types of execution." He said softly. "And this girl interests me. If she won't answer my questions, I'm sure she'll still be a saleable commodity if it transpires she has some connection to Suzaku's people."

"Let me go, you bastard!" Hikari wriggled against his grasp, but Miramu only tightened his hold, brushing the blade lightly against her skin.

“I will slit your throat if it’s the only way to take you.” He warned. “Alive is more interesting, but dead is more convenient. Either works for me.”

He turned back towards the two bandits, a challenge in his gaze as his indigo eyes flitted from one to the other.

“Well?” He murmured. “Even Toroki won’t seek to attack me if I have one of her precious new friends under my control. So it lies with you, Reikaku-zan No Sanzoku. What will you do? Is the fang important enough for you to risk Hikari’s life over? We have an interesting game ahead of us, don’t we?”

He smiled.

“Your move.”

Chapter 13

Chapter Twelve

It was already dark in the Kanin mountains.

As Hyoushin emerged from the cave, running his gaze carefully over the assembled men before him, his eyes narrowed and he thinned his lips, displeasure flickering in his expression.

“Miramu is not here, is he?” He murmured.

“We haven’t seen him, Commander.” Maichu shook his head. “Nor any sign of this wretched shrine. I even offered to cut Aoi up and let him drip his blood all over the passages in case it had an effect — but those tunnels all look the same.”

“And noone is going to cut me up.” Aoiketsu added indignantly. “My blood is mine, thank you, and I’d like to keep it.”

“Considering what happens when you don’t, Aoi, it’s probably a good thing Maichu didn’t.” Kayu reflected. “We had no luck either, sir. No sign of anything even remotely like a shrine.”

“Likewise.” Jakou confirmed, spreading his hands. “Are we sure that it’s really here, Hyoushin-sama? Could that assassin have lied?”

“He is not here.” Hyoushin mused. “But... I wonder what that means. I think perhaps we will wait a little longer before we leave this place. If he does not return by the time the moon is directly overhead, we will go looking for him. And if we have to do that, we will be taking him back to Kutou as a prisoner of the crown. I am fed up with his games and his deceit... he knew very well the terms by which we came here, and I will see him adhere to them.”

“I’d like to carve something pretty on his smug face.” Maichu admitted. “He rubs me up the wrong way, sir... he’s really sneaky and sly, and I hate that.”

“Exactly.” Aoiketsu shivered. “Anyone who can kill his father in cold blood has issues. Maybe we’d be better just leaving him here, Hyoushin-sama. We can hunt tomorrow for the fang, but I don’t think we can trust Miramu to keep his word now we have the Shinzahou in our grasp.”

“A deal with the devil.” Hyoushin murmured, as his mind flitted to

Toroki's hot tempered words, and he shook his head. "No. We must remain here for the time being. On the off-chance he has merely been delayed by an unseen opponent."

"An unseen..." Aoiketsu frowned. "What kind of opponent, Hyoushin-sama?"

"Toroki." Suiko hissed, curling her cape around her as she grimaced in distaste. "That dirty tiger-slave woman is in the tunnels. She tried to hurt Hyoushin... maybe she hurt the assassin, too."

"I'd say he could take it." Kayu muttered. "He's so smug and full of himself that it'd do him good to be spooked out by that weird witch woman."

"You met Toroki down there, sir?" Aoiketsu asked, and Hyoushin nodded.

"In company with representatives of Kounan." He agreed. "Which makes me wonder what kind of a game we are playing. She let us take the treasure without a fight, but in the caves tonight, she was quite another prospect. I do wonder whose hands we're playing into, and what is at stake. And if Miramu is not here shortly, we will go and we will find him. Alive."

His eyes narrowed.

"Because if he does not return here soon of his own accord, I will want to ask him some serious questions."

In the cave beneath the immense cover of Spider's Peak, time seemed to have stopped still.

As Shishi stared in horror at Hikari, caught in the tight, unyielding grip of the assassin, a cold chill ran down her spine. She swallowed hard, uncertain what could be done and yet knowing that something had to be — that somehow they had to find a way to save their friend.

"Hiki said we shouldn't fight Amefuri — but what the hell else can we do?" She muttered, her fingers closing almost instinctively around the hilt of her sword. "We can't let him hurt her. We *can't*!"

"Well?" Miramu's voice seemed to break the uneasy silence in the sacred chamber, and he offered them a cool, even smile. "You do know, I trust, that the strength of a Celestial Warrior is greater than that of an ordinary mortal? It's entertaining to kill her, but I'd like to know a few things before I do. Such as your connection with Toroki — has that hopeless prophet aligned herself with the God of the South,

now she has failed to protect the treasure of the West?”

“You know about that.” Jin’s eyes narrowed. “So you took Seiryuu’s treasure for Kutou and now you’ve done the same with Byakko’s.”

“You’re mistaken.” Miramu shook his head. “I haven’t even seen Toroki in ten years, more or less. Of course, I’m aware of her. She’s the kind of Seishi that it’s difficult to forget about completely, and I can feel the pulse of her life-force as easily as I’m sure she can feel mine. She is a hindrance to me in more ways than one — she can see me where others can’t, and of course, for an assassin, a witness is a terrible thing.”

He smiled.

“I may have to kill you all.” He added. “Considering that fact.”

“You really enjoy this kind of thing, don’t you?” Shishi exclaimed. “You really like hurting people! I bet you felt really good, slashing Meikyo’s arm back in Kounan, and I bet you’d get thrills from killing us here and now too, wouldn’t you? You’re the sickest son of a bitch I’ve ever met... how can someone like *you* be a Celestial Warrior?”

“That’s a damning judgement indeed, coming from someone who makes her home with mountain bandits.” Came the smooth, even response. “I’m quite hurt.”

“You will be, if you don’t let Hikari go.” Jin drew his sword, and Shishi saw a strange, focused resolution in his brown eyes. “I mean it, Miramu. Cowards attack girls. Cowards hurt girls. Celestial Warrior or not — only a weak man would take a woman hostage and threaten to cause her harm.”

“I don’t subscribe to such ideas.” Miramu shook his head. “A hostage is a hostage, and I know from experience how truly fearsome an opponent a woman can be, if you let her take you off guard.”

“Let her go.” Jin repeated softly. “If you want a fight, I’ll fight with you. If it will make you happy, I will. But let Hikari go.”

“Jin, shut up — you don’t know what you’re saying!” Hikari exclaimed, but Jin met her gaze, and Shishi saw something flare in the depths of his eyes.

“I know exactly what I’m saying.” He said quietly. “You’re Hikari. I promised Kashira an’ the Emperor that I’d take care of you — both of you. And a bandit doesn’t break his word, Hikari. Besides, I promised you too, didn’t I? That I’d protect you, no matter what? I *know* what I’m doing.”

“You talk a good fight, for one so young armed only with a mountain sword.” Miramu admitted. “It wouldn’t be an even match, and that would be far from interesting. But you have courage — I suppose that gets you some credit at the very least. You have more about you than those sheep-like Kutou soldiers, always following their ghost’s orders and never thinking for themselves. They could learn a lot from Kounan’s bandits, I think.”

He laughed, evidently amused with himself.

“But then, maybe if they did that, they wouldn’t be so afraid of your people and the things you stand for.” He whispered.

His hold tightened around Hikari at this point, as he pressed the flat of the blade against her windpipe, causing her to cough.

“But that isn’t settling this little matter.” He said, pulling the weapon back once more to allow the girl to breathe. “I’m keeping this one. If you two want to live, leave. The fang belongs to me, Toroki is not here to save you, and I’d like to find out a little more about Hikari.”

“*Let me go!*” As if something had been sparked into life within her, Hikari sent him as vile a look as she could muster, and as Jin let out an exclamation, Shishi registered the faint crimson glow that had begun to haze around the schoolgirl’s young body. Hikari closed her eyes, clenching her fists as if willing the warm red energy to act as a barrier between her and her captor and as Miramu cursed in surprise, she broke free of his grasp, dropping to the floor as the red aura faded and died.

“What the hell was that?” Miramu stared at her in disbelief, and Jin was down at Hikari’s side in an instant, putting himself neatly between her and the assassin as he gazed up at the westerner defiantly.

“Maybe Kounan’s force is something you should be scared of.” He snapped, and Shishi’s eyes widened as she registered the uncharacteristic coldness in her companion’s tones. “Maybe you don’t know as much as you think you do... Amefuri of Byakko.”

“Who *are* you?” Miramu’s gaze rested on Hikari, disbelief still in his expression. “You’ve lied... you must be one of Suzaku’s. It’s the only way...”

“That’s none of your business.” Shishi recovered her wits, pulling her own sword from its scabbard as she too moved to defend Hikari from Miramu’s attentions. As she did so, she cast the schoolgirl a

sidelong glance, realising that, although the aura had faded, some element of Suzaku's power still swirled within her and the expression in her hazel eyes was almost unearthly. Inwardly Shishi half-wondered whether or not Hikari was with them at all, now — or whether she was under some kind of Suzaku spell as the God's magic had fought to preserve her life.

"She ain't strong enough to maintain it yet, or use it. An' she's more damn vulnerable after she's used it than she is before." She realised grimly. "Each time, before, its wiped her out, some. An' this is the same... it must be. Dammit, in front of this guy... an' the fang..."

Miramu gazed at them for a moment, as if gauging his next move. For an instant he tensed, glancing towards the door of the chamber as if he sensed something coming his way, and he muttered another curse.

"There's no time for this." He murmured, reaching to grab the bone chest from beneath Byakko's paw. As he pulled it free, he snapped two of the beautifully carved claws, sending them clattering to the ground, and at the sound of it, Hikari seemed to snap to attention, raising her head as she stared at the box in his hand.

"Hiki?" Shishi murmured, unnerved by Hikari's expression, but the girl did not seem to hear her as she got slowly to her feet, a resolute, fixed expression on her face as she kept her gaze unwaveringly on the article in Miramu's hand.

"The fang of Byakko." She murmured, and Miramu's eyes narrowed as he nodded his head.

"Yes." He replied. "I can touch it. This place doesn't hurt me... I'm Byakko's Chosen, and it's my right. You're the alien here, Hikari. You and your friends. You have no right to touch this. None at all."

Hikari frowned, as if only half-digesting this. Then, with a strange yell, she launched herself at him, stretching her fingers to grab at the casket. As she did so, she knocked it from his hand, and as Miramu almost fell off balance, he grabbed her roughly by the arm, fumbling once more for his knife. In the momentary struggle, Hikari's watch slipped loose from her wrist, falling forgotten to the chamber floor as she worked to evade Miramu's swift, ruthless reflexes.

"Hikari!" Jin's yell pierced through the chamber as he darted forward, and Shishi felt her heart leap in her chest as time seemed to move in slow motion. Frozen to the spot, she could only stare in horror as the Byakko Seishi wielded his weapon in the young schoolgirl's direction, and then, as it seemed the blade would pierce

her, Jin was in the way, his sword against Miramu's dagger as he sought to push the weapon back.

"Shishi, get Hikari away from here." He gasped, and Shishi jerked back into life, nodding her head as she darted forward to grab Hikari by the arm.

"Hiki, are you crazy?" She demanded. "You can't just go jumping guys like that — not even with Hotohori-sama's sword!"

"We have to get the fang." Hikari raised anxious eyes to Shishi's bronze ones. "We need to do that... don't we?"

"You're confused. You're not acting on your own impulses." Shishi shook her head. "We need to get out of here. Forget the fang — let Myoume handle the fang. We weren't meant to come here and this is why. Let it go, Hiki. This isn't a safe place and even the best fighter knows when to withdraw."

She turned to where Jin was still struggling against Miramu's strength, a frown crossing her features.

"Don't fight him." She called out. "Pull back. We didn't come here for this — remember what Myoume said!"

"Myoume..." Jin's expression darkened, and he nodded.

"I remember." He murmured, and Shishi was suddenly aware that his words seemed to carry something more foreboding than just the warning not to enter the shrine. "Shishi, get Hikari out of here, dammit. Get her out of here and snap her to her senses. Don't worry about me... just damn well do it!"

"Jin, you're being an idiot!"

"Shishi, do as you're damn well told!"

Shishi started at the impatience in her fellow bandit's voice, staring at him in disbelief. In all the years they had known each other, he had never spoken to her like that before. As she made to retort, however, the glitter of Miramu's weapon swept through the air and Jin fell back, muttering a curse as he clutched a hand to his ribcage.

"Jin!" Hikari screamed, suddenly returned to herself as she registered her friend's peril, and Shishi felt cold inside as she watched the Byakko Seishi advance on his fallen opponent.

"Too rash, too impulsive." She heard Miramu reproach. "You throw your life away, boy... for what? To protect two women who aren't smart enough to protect themselves — or even to listen to your

instructions, when you willingly throw yourself before my blade? It's foolish... you've been rash."

"No, I've not." Jin retorted, pulling his blade up as if preparing to fight once more. "I know what I'm doing. I'm here for this reason, Miramu. I'm not afraid of you, or of what you can do to me. You can't hurt Hikari so long as I'm here. So I'm here. Do what you like. I don't care. I'm not going to give up that easily!"

"Have it your way." Miramu shrugged, tightening his grasp on his weapon as he readied himself for a second assault. "Your strength is second to mine, boy, although I do admire your courage to do it. Jin — is that your name? I'll remember it, I think. Most of my victims beg for mercy before I bring them darkness. You won't be one of those, will you? I like to see it. I don't like cowards."

"Well, I'm sure as hell not a coward." Jin pulled himself to his feet, holding his sword firmly in his hand, although Shishi was aware of the red that stained the upper portion of his clothing. "I'm ready for you."

"Jin, stop it! Stop fighting him!" Hikari begged, but Jin ignored her, his stance only becoming more resolute at the sound of her voice.

"I won't let anything happen to you or to Shishi." He called back, and Shishi bit her lip as she registered the suppressed pain in his voice. "I promised Kashira an' a bandit keeps his word!"

"Obligation till death... you bandits sure do run deep." Miramu reflected. "But you can't..."

He faltered in mid-speech, his brow furrowing suddenly as his gaze darted towards the shrine opening once more. He muttered a curse, and as Shishi followed his gaze she saw Myoume standing between the carved stone panels, a strange, unreadable look on her face.

"I thought I told you not to come here." She said softly. "Jin..."

Jin did not answer, and Myoume sighed, a troubled expression touching her indigo eyes as she stepped slowly into the chamber.

"Miramu." She murmured.

Much to Shishi's surprise, Miramu took a step away from the wounded bandit, slipping his dagger into his belt as he cast the newcomer a pained look. For a moment, they exchanged glances that somehow seemed to convey everything and nothing in one brief instant. Then the assassin darted forward, scooping up the bone chest as he retrieved his carved bow from the chamber wall. He cast Myoume another strange look, anguish flickering in his seiran gaze,

then, before their eyes, he vanished.

For a moment, nothing moved. Then Myoume sighed, closing her eyes.

“He’s gone.” She murmured. “And he’s taken the fang with him.”

“Jin!” At her words, Jin stumbled to his knees, and Hikari pulled herself free of Shishi’s grasp, hurrying to his side. “Jin! Are you all right? Jin? You’re bleeding — are you okay?”

“Are *you*?” Jin cast her an anxious look. “You’re not hurt — he didn’t harm you?”

“I’m fine.” Hikari shook her head. “I’m sorry... I don’t know why I did that. It was... I didn’t mean to. It just... happened. Like Suzaku...”

She faltered, as Shishi came slowly to sit by their side.

“Jin?” She murmured, as she knelt beside them, her keen gaze noticing the pallor of his face and the blueness of his lips. “Loose your tunic. I want to see what he’s done. We need to stop the bleedin’ an’ Chichiri must’ve given us something to help.”

Jin offered her a rueful smile, reaching a blooded fist across to take her hand in his. He squeezed it, but there was something lacking in the strength and Shishi frowned, eying him carefully.

“Jin-kun?”

“You fool.” Myoume bit her lip, and at her words, Jin raised his gaze to hers, a flicker of resignation in his gaze. “What did I say to you? Jin, I was serious. I meant it... why didn’t you listen to me, dammit? I told you... why didn’t you *listen*?”

Tears glittered in her indigo eyes, and something cold stirred in Shishi’s heart.

“What do you mean?” She demanded sharply. “Jin, what’s she talking about? What did she tell you? What have you done?”

“What I promised Kashira.” Jin said evenly. “Don’t look at me like that, Shi-chan. I ain’t a coward an’ I ain’t lettin’ anythin’ happen to you or Hikari. You know that.”

He winced, drawing a hoarse breath into his lungs, and Shishi’s eyes widened.

“Shit.” She whispered. “What the hell *have* you done? You ain’t breathin’ right — did that bastard slice your lung? Jin, we need to get you out of here! We need to find a doctor!”

“It’s bad?” Hikari looked alarmed. “Jin — you’re shivering. Shishi’s right... at least let us take a look at the wound. Maybe there’s something we can do to stop it bleeding like this.”

Jin was silent for a moment. Then he reached his finger up to brush her cheek, shaking his head.

“If I hadn’t done it, he’d have killed you.” He said quietly. “An’ if that happens, it ain’t jus’ me that’s doomed. Everyone is. Everything. So I made the only choice I could, that’s all. It’s okay... there ain’t nothin’ you or Shishi can do about it, an’ I... I don’t want to move anywhere. I’m fine... right here. It’s all right.”

“Jin?” Fear gripped Shishi’s heart and she grabbed him by the shoulders, meeting his gaze head on. “What are you saying, you idiot? You’re not... you ain’t going to die, do you hear me? You’re not! It’s just a li’l scratch — you can take worse than that! On the mountain... you can take more than that!”

Jin closed his eyes briefly, then he sent her a resigned glance.

“Poisoned.” He murmured, as Shishi realised how laboured his breathing truly was. “The blade... was... otherwise...”

He faltered, and Shishi realised she too was shaking, as she struggled to come to terms with what he was saying.

“There must be some kind of antidote in among Chichiri’s stuff.” Hikari was already rummaging frantically through the pack. “Something we can give you — just hang on in there, Jin. Keep breathing. There must be...”

“There’s nothing you can do.” Myoume said softly, and Shishi was aware of the tears that now ran down the older woman’s cheeks. “It’s too late, Hikari. That’s why I didn’t want you to come here... to face Amefuri before the statue of the tiger like this. I knew... and I told him... but...”

“You *what*?” Rage flooded Shishi as she glared at the Seishi in disbelief. “You *knew* this would happen? You knew all about Amefuri and Miramu too, didn’t you? But you never told us they were the same!”

“I didn’t know that you had met Miramu at all.” Myoume said, distress evident on her features. “And yes, I knew... I knew and I tried to stop it. I tried to tell him...”

“I had to.” Jin whispered. “Myoume... Hikari is... Shinzahou. You said it... the one... who can... save this world. I... I’m just... a bandit.

I... ain't... as important... as her.”

“That’s rubbish!” Hikari protested. “Jin, I never asked you to die for me! Please... hang on! Hang on! I’ll find something here in Chichiri’s remedies — there must be *something* we can do!”

“You bastard, you’re *not* going to up and die and leave me.” Shishi exclaimed, grabbing Jin tightly by the hands. “You an’ me, we’re gonna be like Kashira an’ Anieue one day, remember? Are you gonna run out on that? You know it’s always been that way — you ain’t allowed to die!”

Jin drew a painful breath into his lungs, eying her gently.

“Stay strong, imouto-chan.” He murmured, and Shishi’s eyes widened at the affectionate ‘little sister’ nickname that he had never before used. “You’ll be Kashira. You’re... strong. With or without... me. You’re like... Kashira. You’ll... be all right.”

“Like hell are you getting off that easily!” Shishi was frantic now. “Jin, dammit, *stop talking like that!*”

“Tell... Kashira... I did... my best. Okay?” Jin’s brow creased in pain, and Shishi swallowed hard at the greyness of his skin. “I... want to go... back to the... mountain, Shishi. Promise me?”

“I... of course you’re goin’ back, you idiot! We’re all going back! *All of us!*”

“Then... it’s all... all right.” A look of relief crossed Jin’s features, as his eyelids fluttered shut and he slumped unconscious against her.

“Jin?” Shishi murmured hoarsely, but there was no response, and with a trembling hand, she reached up touch his neck, feeling for a pulse.

There was none, and her heart froze in her chest.

“Jin?” She whispered. “Jin, dammit... *Jin!*”

This last she yelled out, the word echoing around the shrine as both grief and anger swirled through her soul, choking her and making her feel sick and dizzy with disbelief.

Myoume closed her eyes, pressing her hands together absently in prayer as she slowly shook her head.

“Byakko protect him. Suzaku, take care of his soul.” She murmured softly.

“Jin?” As Shishi dazedly set the still body down on the shrine floor,

Hikari reached out a tentative finger to touch him, her voice wavering on the edge of hysteria as she seemed to grasp the fact her young friend had lost his grip on life.

She shook her head.

“No.” She whispered. “No, you can’t die. *You can’t die!* This isn’t... it isn’t supposed to happen! It’s not supposed to be this way... *it’s not supposed to be!*”

“Hikari, calm down.” Myoume said softly, but her words fell on deaf ears as tears coursed down the schoolgirl’s cheeks.

“Noone’s supposed to die for me.” She murmured. “I hate this. I hate it! I can’t bear it. I can’t let you die because of me! I can’t let you, Jin! *I can’t bear it!*”

As her voice raised in pitch, her body became engulfed once more in a bright vermillion light and as she let out a cry of grief, the light flared more brightly, filling the chamber and causing Shishi to have to shield her eyes from the glare. As the light dimmed, Myoume let out an exclamation, and as Shishi lowered her hand, she realised that where her friend had been there was now nothing.

She cursed.

“Hiki.” She murmured. “Dammit, not again!”

“Again?” Myoume frowned. “She’s done this before?”

Shishi nodded numbly, her gaze returning to Jin’s cooling body as she did so.

“She’s left me alone. They both have.” She whispered. “She’s damn well abandoned me... they’ve both abandoned me! Shit, Myoume, if you knew this was going to happen, why the hell didn’t you stop him? Why the hell...”

She faltered, fighting her emotions, and Myoume sighed, rubbing her temples.

“I tried.” She repeated. “I told him what I’d seen... maybe by doing so I sealed his fate. I don’t know... I hate not knowing. But I had to try. I didn’t know if I could prevent it — and I didn’t know you knew my brother by his real name. But...”

“Wait a damn minute.” Shishi was alert, grabbing the Seishi by the shoulders as she gave her a little shake. “Miramu is your *brother*? That damn bandit-murdering child-kidnapping bastard is your *brother*?”

“Yes.” Myoume whispered, anguish in her indigo eyes. “My older

brother... four years apart. I'm sorry, Shishi. I'm sorry for what he's done... to you, to Hikari, to everyone. I... I... I can't stop him. I'm useless, in the end. I see things but I can't prevent them. I wanted... I wanted to protect Jin. I didn't want my brother to take his life. But in the end... I wasn't able to. I couldn't stop it... I couldn't save him."

At the pain in Myoume's voice, Shishi felt her anger crumble and as grief overwhelmed her, she felt the unfamiliar tears well up in her eyes.

"Jin was *my* brother." She said unevenly. "Even if not by blood, Myoume, he was. He was. He was always gonna be there, to look out for me. We were... one day, we were gonna rule the mountain together, like Kashira an' Anie do. It was always... the way... things were going to be. An' now... an' now..."

She faltered, unable to go on, and Myoume slid a gentle arm around her shoulders.

"He wanted to go home." She murmured sadly. "And that's what we should do. My family bear the blood debt for this, and therefore we'll go to the village and demand their help to carry out his wishes. I'll come with you back to Kounan, Shishi... you're not alone, I promise. Even if right now you hate me, for being Miramu's sister, or for... for being such a useless excuse for a prophet — I won't abandon you. Not like this. I know how it feels... to lose a brother."

Shishi closed her eyes, struggling with her emotions once more. Then she reached across to scoop up Hikari's forgotten watch, running her finger over the scraped surface as she cast the Seishi a helpless look.

"What about Hiki?"

"Hikari isn't in Sairou any more." Myoume shook her head, and Shishi stared at her, absently fastening the watch around her own wrist as she did so.

"Not in Sairou? But...?"

"She's not here." Myoume spread her hands helplessly. "She's gone."

"Gone where?"

"Gone home." Myoume murmured, biting her lip.

"Back to her world."

Chapter 14

Chapter Thirteen

As Miramu re-materialised on the moonlit slopes outside of the spider's mountain, he took a deep breath of air into his lungs, struggling to compose himself as he remembered the encounter with his sister in the underground shrine. For Jin's death he felt nothing — that the bandit would by now have succumbed to the swift-acting poison he had slipped onto the blade before plunging it through the young man's clothing did not even flicker at the edges of his conscience. But in Myoume's dark eyes, so like his own, he had seen the one thing that could still pierce him right through to his soul.

Her anguish at his disgrace.

He sighed, rubbing his temples as he struggled to push the image out of his mind. He fumbled at his belt for the pouch of herbal stems, his gaze touching briefly on the blooded blade and he frowned, pulling it from its loop as he wiped it clean of the young boy's blood.

"Damn you, Byakko." He muttered fiercely, as he returned the weapon to its casual position at his left side. "I thought you couldn't possibly make my life worse, but as usual, I was wrong. After ten years... what has time done to my sister? What have *you* done to her, you bastard? Bringing her to me like that... knowing how I feel. I will not kill her, no matter what poisonous pictures you feed into her foolish head! *I will not do it* — don't you understand that? I'll slay every one of Reikaku-zan's bandits before I'll lay a finger on Myoume... so take that and swallow it, you overgrown housecat!"

"Miramu!"

The voice shot through his shattered senses and he swung around, registering the presence of Hyoushin, Aoiketsu and Kayu in tow as they approached him. He sighed, forcing the shreds of his composure back into place as he raised his eyebrow, sending the paleskinned Meihi a questioning look.

"You look troubled, Hyoushin." He said softly. "What's ailing you?"

"We said to meet before the sun set." Hyoushin said quietly. "You are late."

"I had a little trouble in the shrine." Miramu admitted, holding up

his blooded, wrapped hand as proof. “But I also have something else — something that you want.”

He held out the bone casket, and Hyoushin eyed it carefully.

“The fang is in there?” He asked softly. Miramu nodded.

“It is.” He confirmed. “Sealed within the shrine of Kitora, beneath the mountains. Just as I told you it was. It just took a little more time to get my bearings — and then, as I said, I got delayed.”

“What kind of trouble?” Kayu eyed him suspiciously. “What did you do?”

“Kounan’s people were there. They’re in league with Toroki, and they came to find that too.” Miramu said evenly. “I killed one of them, and took this before I left. That’s all.”

“Kounan’s people.” Hyoushin’s eyes narrowed. “I see. Yes. I saw them too. But you say you killed one of them?”

“He was in my way.” Miramu shrugged. “Don’t pretend you’re going to get sentimental about the enemy now, Hyoushin. He was only a bandit with a very ordinary sword. I doubt his death would cause your Emperor to receive a declaration of war. He was quite brave, but nothing extraordinary. Just a boy... that’s all. Nothing else.”

“And yet such a boy managed to wound you?” Hyoushin reflected. Miramu looked rueful, inwardly realising that even such a concession was better than admitting the truth of his Celestial identity to his travel companions.

“I suppose so.” He acknowledged at length, unwinding the stained cloth from his palm as he glanced at the clotting wound. As he did so, he caught Aoiketsu’s eye, noticing the look of dismay that flickered across the soldier’s face.

“What’s with you, Aoi-kun?” He asked lightly. “You’re distressed because the one I killed was probably no older than you or your friend?”

“I don’t like that you killed anyone.” Aoiketsu said slowly. “And I don’t like you waving that hand around like it’s some kind of brave battle scar. You’re a murderer anyway — don’t pretend you were a wounded hero obtaining Byakko’s treasure at great personal risk.”

“On the contrary, there *was* great personal risk.” Miramu’s eyes darkened, and he was unable to keep the edge from his voice. “*Toroki* saw me down there. Her prophesy is that we will meet, and she will

kill me. What use would I have been to you then, if she had chosen today to do it? If you want to blame anyone for the fiasco in the shrine, blame your Commander, Aoiketsu. *He* made me come below with you. I take no responsibility for anything that happened as a result.”

“Convenient of you.” Hyoushin murmured, and Miramu spread his hands.

“You know I’m right.” He responded.

“Please, dammit, put that hand away somewhere?” Aoiketsu grimaced. “You’re making it bleed again...”

He faltered, biting his lip, and Miramu eyed him keenly.

“So they’re *not* just idle rumours.” He realised. “You really *are* a soldier who fears the scent of blood? That’s almost ironic, given that your name means ‘blue blood’ — does it not?”

“Shut up. Just wrap it up and put it away.” Aoiketsu snapped back thickly. “Just because you get a kick out of gore doesn’t mean the rest of us do.”

“Aoiketsu, pull yourself together.” Hyoushin said quietly. “This is not the time for you to pass out... we have to make camp for the night somewhere safe and sheltered and I do not wish to have to carry you back to the others.”

“I’m not going to pass out.” Aoiketsu said firmly. “I just think he’s gross. That’s all.”

“You could have learnt a few things from the young fool I killed.” Miramu reflected, a malicious glitter entering his eyes as he surveyed the youngster’s pallor in the bright moonlight. “He fought back even though I’d run my blade right through him... even with the blood running from his body, he was still determined to give his all. It puts you rather to shame, doesn’t it, when you consider that he was just a bandit — and *you’re* meant to be a soldier.”

He stretched his fingers absently, tilting his palm so that the light caught his wound.

“I wonder why it is Hyoushin keeps you so close.” He added. “When obviously you’re not much use on the field of battle.”

This was too much for Aoiketsu, whose face drained of any remaining colour and he clamped his hand over his mouth, disappearing into the shadows as his nausea overwhelmed him. Miramu laughed, shaking his head in amusement, although with the

memory of Myoume's expression still lurking in his mind, the triumph felt hollow.

"He really is quite the entertainer." He reflected. "That must be why you continue to train him, Hyoushin. He's amusing, to say the least."

"I have warned you about tormenting my men." Hyoushin said impassively. "Bring the fang. We will return to the others — and I would appreciate it if you would not try my patience again before we leave Kutou."

"You still need me, because I'm the only one who might know something about the spell to raise Kitora." Miramu said evenly. "Toroki aside, and I doubt she'll help you. Not if she knows you're working with me — and I can't imagine that she doesn't know. There's very little that she can't see... even without the Shinzahou."

"She knows, for I spoke to her again this evening." Hyoushin said softly, and something in his gaze put Miramu on his guard. He eyed the Meihi warily, but Hyoushin met his gaze without hesitation, a faint question in the amethyst eyes. Miramu's lips thinned, but he decided it was safer not to ask what exactly had passed between the Commander and his sister in the mountain tunnels that night.

"Hadn't you better reel in your lost lamb? Make sure he hasn't lost consciousness somewhere on account of his little weakness?" He said instead. "It's probably not good to be alone on the mountain at night."

"Indeed not." Hyoushin agreed. "Aoiketsu? Get a grip on yourself. We need to return to the others, and I intend to leave now."

"I... I'm all right." Aoiketsu emerged, his face still pale as he sent Miramu a dark look. "You're a sadistic jerk, Miramu, you know that? I can't help reacting that way... it's not nice to provoke me on purpose."

"Call it aversion therapy. Or training." Miramu shrugged unrepentantly. "You can't be a soldier and defend your country without shedding blood, Aoi-kun. And so you need not to be afraid of it. I'm really doing you a favour."

"Like hell you are." Aoiketsu muttered.

"There is one other thing." As the four men headed through the mountain land to where the rest of the party were waiting, Miramu remembered what else had happened within the shrine.

"Such as?" Hyoushin glanced at him, and Miramu once again had

the impression that the Meihi knew something that he had not yet voiced. He frowned, inwardly making up his mind.

“Two can play that game. I’ll give you the bare bones, but until you show me your cards, Hyoushin, I won’t reveal all I know.” He decided.

“Well?” Hyoushin prompted. “What is it?”

“There’s a girl with Suzaku’s party that’s interesting to me.” Miramu said slowly, and Kayu snorted.

“You’re sick *and* perverted?” He demanded. “Figures.”

“Not in that way.” Miramu shook his head. “She’s still a child — I’m most definitely not, so give me some credit. No. I don’t mean like that.”

He frowned, remembering the odd flare of red light.

“Her name is Hikari.” He added. “I don’t know what it is... but there’s something about her. Something strange. Something I’ve never seen before.”

“Hikari.” Hyoushin’s eyes narrowed to near slits as he digested this. “Suiko said something similar. Myself, I saw only a young girl, but Suiko also said that the child called Hikari interested her. She has not been explicit on the subject — and I’m guessing from your vagueness that you don’t intend on giving me any further detail?”

“I can’t explain what it is, so you’re going to have to do with intuition.” Miramu said evenly. “But there’s definitely something. You might want to look into that before you take your little baa-lambs into the Phoenix’s territory.”

“Perhaps so.” Hyoushin admitted. “Very well. I have taken that on board.”

“Am I forgiven for my lateness then, Hyoushin-sama?”

“It’s not up to me, whether or not you’re forgiven for anything you do.” Hyoushin shrugged. “You are here now. You have the fang. We shall say no more about it.”

“I’m honoured.”

A hint of his usual droll irony touched Miramu’s words and he bowed his head mockingly in the Commander’s direction, somehow feeling better at the usual coolness of his companion’s level temperament.

“Cold as ice, but somehow his impassiveness is reassuring.” He

realised ruefully. “To be around someone who lacks feeling is a relief — one who can’t feel can’t try to understand. And truly, I do not want anyone to understand what went through my head this evening. What I was thinking, when I met my sister’s gaze across Byakko’s shrine.”

He frowned, his lips thinning at the thought.

“If it is ten years again before the next time, it will be too soon.” He murmured. “Curse us both, Byakko, but don’t force us into one another’s company before you intend to make good on your dark predictions. I don’t want to see Myoume again until the day I’m to die... so unless you plan on bringing that day forward, you can keep your slave far out of my line of sight.”

He sighed, moving to follow the trio of soldiers as they headed back to their campsite.

“I’ll go back to Kutou with Hyoushin and his companions.” He decided firmly. “And somehow I’ll keep my secret, even if I do help them raise Kitora’s spirit. At least, if I’m in the Eastern lands, there’s little chance of me crossing paths with Toroki again.”

At first, everything around her seemed to be in darkness.

As slowly she became aware of something hard and smooth beneath her body, Hikari struggled to gather the scattered shards of her consciousness, feeling trapped and stifled in the black vacuum that seemed to have engulfed her. Vaguely she could remember a bright flare of vermillion, hot and driving as it swept through her, taking charge of every cell in her body until she could stand the burning energy no longer. Now it was gone, leaving her feeling cold and empty, and as she tried to move, her battered muscles complained at the attempt.

For a while she lay there, not knowing where she was, or even why she had been drawn to this strange, dark nothingness. Then, as more and more awareness returned to her she began to realise that it wasn’t that the world was dark, only that she was shutting it out, her eyes screwed closed as if to provide a barrier between her and the reality of her surroundings.

Slowly she opened her eyes, and as she did so, a rush of colour and light flooded her senses, disorientating her. She reached out to grab something for support, her fingers reaching something tall and firm, and as she brought it into better focus she realised that it was a bookshelf, and that the room was full of books.

She frowned.

“Shishi?” She murmured, and as she breathed the bandit’s name, another memory slashed through her, causing her to draw breath sharply as the image became vivid in her mind.

“*Jin!*” She exclaimed, now alert as she scrambled into a sitting position, glancing around her in dismay and disbelief. “But this... this is... the National Library? But... how is that...”

She faltered, as she caught sight of the blood spatters that stained the skirt Aidou had so carefully stitched to her measurements before they had left Kounan for Sairou, and as she brushed her fingers against the already darkening stains, tears welled once more in her eyes.

“Jin.” She whispered. “It wasn’t a dream. It was... real. But... this is... this is the library. *Isn’t* it?”

She got slowly to her feet, a strange numbness setting in as she realised that somehow she had not only come back to her world but that in doing so she had left Shishi, Myoume, Jin and the Shijin Tenchishou far behind her.

“But it was real.” She murmured. “I’ve come back... but Jin’s blood... is still on my clothing. Jin’s death... he really did die... for me.”

As if voicing this fact aloud had broken through her cold disbelief, grief and panic finally overwhelmed her as she drew a shaky breath into her lungs. Tears glittered on her cheeks, and as she reached up to brush them away more fell. Eventually she gave up trying to stop them, burying her head in her dusty hands.

“How could you die for me?” She murmured. “How could you... do something... how could you tell me you loved me, and then... do something like that? And how can I be back here? I was there, in the shrine, with Shishi and... now I’ve come back to my world. I’ve come back... on my own... somehow.”

She glanced up at the bookshelves that loomed over her, her gaze scanning the rows of dusty volumes until she found the one with the familiar kanji on the spine.

“Shijin Tenchishou.” She murmured, reaching out to take it with shaking hands as she ran her fingers over the smooth red covers. “This book... this one. I went... somehow... inside here.”

For a moment she held it, as it seemed to burn against her fingers.

Then, as her courage failed her, she shoved it back into the bookcase, taking a deep breath as she tried to calm her pounding heart.

“I’m home.” She said it aloud, as if somehow by doing so she could make herself feel better. “I’m back in my world. Back in my real, proper life. Suzaku’s sent me back.”

She stumbled across the room to the door, reaching out to touch the handle, but as she turned it, the door held fast.

“Locked.” She murmured, as panic began to rise within her once more. “But... now I remember. This room was restricted access. They keep it locked. They locked me in. Of course I wouldn’t... and I’ve probably been missing for days. Noone would even think...”

She trailed off, as fear flooded through her anew, and she swallowed hard, pounding on the door as she let her emotions take control. She no longer cared whether or not she got into trouble for being in that part of the library. All she knew was that she was home, and that she wanted her family more than she had ever wanted anything in her life before.

“Besides, I *can’t* go back. I don’t know how to go back.” She whispered, tears streaming down her face as she pounded on the door a second time. “And Shishi... Shishi’d never forgive me. Jin died... because of me. I’m not a help to Kounan, I’m a curse. If I hadn’t been there, he wouldn’t have died. They won’t want me back, now they know I’m no divine saviour. I’m just Sukunami Hikari after all... and because of it, Jin...”

She closed her eyes, pounding a third time on the hard wooden door.

“Let me out of here! Someone, please, let me out!” She exclaimed. “I want to go home — *let me out of here!*”

As she sank against the wood, she heard the sound of a click, and she jerked back, staring as the door slowly opened to reveal a rather annoyed looking member of library staff. At the sight of her, however, his eyes widened, and for a moment he faltered, as if unable to believe what he was seeing.

“What are you doing in here, musume?” He asked softly. “This door’s kept locked — how did you manage that?”

Hikari just stared at him, lost for words, and he sighed, scratching his head as he surveyed her.

“You’re some kind of a mess, aren’t you?” He murmured. “All right.

You come with me — we'll have a little chat and you can tell me who you are and what you're doing here. Some kind of dare I imagine — right? A joke gone wrong? You look dressed up for some kind of cultural festival — let me guess, you and your friends got a little too adventurous and decided to play around in the library? You should tell them it's not funny, getting their companions locked in restricted areas. That room has a lot of precious documents stored inside — you could get into a lot of trouble for being there."

"I... I'm sorry." Hikari managed. "It was... an accident. I didn't... know."

"Didn't you see the sign?" The man's brow creased. "No unauthorised access."

"I... didn't... read it." Hikari faltered, and the man sighed.

"They don't teach you kids anything these days, in those schools of yours." He muttered. "If you all spent more time studying in libraries and less time playing computer games you'd learn your kanji much more quickly and you wouldn't find yourself in silly predicaments."

Hikari did not reply, too tired suddenly to try and explain the circumstances that had led her to the room in the first place. It seemed such a long time ago, although she had no idea how much time had actually passed, and at her lack of response, her rescuer sighed.

"My office is this way." He said at length. "You going to at least tell me your name, kid? Some parent or other's probably worried sick about you — it's almost time for library closing, and they must be wondering where you've got yourself."

"Sukunami Hikari." Hikari murmured softly, and the man nodded.

"Right. That's a good start." He reflected. "And do you have a telephone number that I could contact a parent on?"

For a moment Hikari's mind went blank. Then she frowned, nodding her head.

"My mother... is probably at home." She said quietly, hesitating, then giving the telephone number.

"She's usually there." She added.

"All right." The man nodded, making a note on the scrap of paper in his hand. "Then you come and take a seat in my office and I'll get you a glass of water. You're dusty and pale and you're too messed up for me to be cross with you. Are you hurt? Those marks on your skirt... they look like blood."

“It’s not my blood.” Hikari murmured absently, and the man looked startled.

“Then what...?”

“It... it’s fake blood.” With a jolt, Hikari realised how strange her words had sounded, and she blushed, inwardly cursing her lack of composure. “From the... from the play. In... the cultural... festival.”

“Oh. I see.” The man’s face cleared. “And the sword too, I trust? You kids have been busy.”

“The... sword?” Hikari’s eyes widened, as her fingers went to her waist, brushing against the hilt of the *shinken* as she did so. “I... brought that back with me, too?”

“Sure looks like it.” The man grinned. “It’s a damn fine piece of prop-work, though — I’m sure your school’s drama department will be looking high and low for it tonight.”

“Someone will be.” Hikari bit her lip. “Are you... are you going to call security on me? Because I was in... that room?”

“I should, but I won’t.” The man shook his head. “You’ve scared yourself more than anything with this little prank, so I think you’ve learnt your lesson. So long as you don’t try it again, I’ll let it go — but I will call your mother, and have someone come and pick you up. It’s late, and it’s dark out... I wouldn’t want you wandering the streets in this shaken up state. Not even with your school’s best sword to defend you!”

Hikari fingered the *shinken* again, a troubled look entering her dark eyes.

“I wouldn’t even know where to begin.” She said honestly.

As they reached the office, Hikari found herself ushered down into an empty seat, as her rescuer disappeared into the back to make a phone call to the Sukunami home. In a short few moments he was back again, eying her thoughtfully as he did so.

“*Would* you like something to drink?” He asked. “I just spoke to your father and he’s coming right over, but you look very shaky still.”

“No... I... I just want to go... home.” Hikari murmured, relief flooding her heart at his words. “Dad’s coming to get me? Right now?”

“Yes.” The man nodded. “I’m sure you won’t have long to wait.”

“Thank goodness.” Hikari closed her eyes briefly. “I... I’m really sorry to... put you to so much trouble. I didn’t mean...”

She trailed off, and the man smiled.

“Well, kids will be kids.” He said reflectively. “It’s all right, this time I’ll forgive you. But don’t spend too much time hanging around the restricted area of the library again, all right? If you do, you might find someone making an official complaint to your school and you don’t want this kind of thing on your permanent record, now do you?”

“No sir.” Hikari shook her head. “I... I’ll remember. To be honest I... don’t want to come back here any time soon.”

“Then I’m sure it’ll all even itself out.” The man eyed her keenly. “Your father didn’t sound angry, you know. Just relieved you were safe. Like as not he and your mother have been worried about you, not coming home from school. It’s near enough eleven o’clock... they must’ve wondered where you’d got to.”

Hikari nodded her head slowly.

“I’m sure.” She whispered.

At that moment there was a knock at the door, and as the library employee moved to open it, Hikari was aware of soft voices from the other side. A stranger stood there, but behind him, anxiety and hope in his eyes was a familiar face and at the sight of him Hikari felt the last of her composure slip away.

“Dad!” She exclaimed, and Taka hurried forwards, hugging her tightly as he registered his daughter’s emotional condition.

“It’s all right, Hikari-chan. You’re coming home now.” He said softly, and as she gazed up at him, she saw something unspoken in his expression. Slowly she nodded, swallowing hard.

“That’s what I want.” She whispered. “To go... home.”

“I’m very sorry for the inconvenience, sir.” Taka bowed his head apologetically at the library employee. “I’m sure it won’t be allowed to happen again.”

“Just take the girl home, Sukunami-san.” The man smiled. “I think she’s learnt her lesson -scared out of her wits, she looked, when I found her.”

Taka eyed his daughter again, then nodded.

“So I see.” He murmured. “Thank you for helping her. Come on, Hikari. The car’s downstairs and the library will be closing soon — besides, you and I have things to talk about.”

With that he slipped his hand into hers, and something about her

father's strong, secure grip calmed Hikari's jittery heart somewhat. She nodded wordlessly, allowing herself to be led out of the office and down the stairs towards the library's main entrance. A few of the late night customers sent her odd glances as they passed, taking in her unusual attire, but for once Hikari did not care about how she appeared. That she was back in her world was enough, and as they reached the waiting Sukunami car, she paused, casting her father a doubtful glance.

"Are you... cross with me?" She asked softly. Taka started, staring at her. Then he smiled, shaking his head.

"No." He admitted. "We've just been too worried about you for that. Especially after the message from Chichiri. We knew... both your mother and I... where you were even before that. But... well, the Shijin-Tenchishou is no piece of cake to tackle. I'm glad to see you in one piece."

Hikari nodded slowly.

"Just about." She agreed hesitantly. "I... don't really know how or why I came back... now. I just... sort of... did."

"Well, get in the car and we'll talk about it." Taka gestured, and Hikari nodded, doing as she was bidden as she fumbled to fasten her seatbelt. "In some ways, it's our fault too — there's a lot of things that we never told you or Makoto. And I can understand why you'd get so confused... considering the little bits of information you had."

"I... I'm sorry I took the money." Hikari flushed. "I really really am and I'll never do anything like it again. Really, Dad. I promise."

She bit her lip.

"And I..I'm sorry I said you weren't my father." She added softly. "I just felt like... all of a sudden I didn't know you. And in some ways I think I feel... a little bit like that still. Chichiri and Tasuki had so many stories about Tamahome and Suzaku no Miko and I didn't feel a part of them. That I'd be a Shinzahou — what a Shinzahou even was... there was a lot I didn't understand. And I guess, I still don't."

She sighed, glancing at her dusty fingers.

"Are you Sukunami Taka or Sou Kishuku? Really?" She whispered. Taka frowned, fastening his own belt as he put the car into gear.

"Both." He said honestly. "I was Tamahome when I met your mother — Sou Kishuku, a man of that world just as Chichiri and Tasuki are. And I had the power of one of Suzaku's chosen, too. But

after the last battle with a demon called Tenkou, both your mother and I... well, we were given the choice as to where we would live our lives. In order to be with Miaka, I gave up my past and memories as Sou Kishuku and became Sukunami Taka, because Sukunami Taka could live in this world... Sou Kishuku could not. And my memories were returned to me in order to fight Tenkou... so now I know I'm both people."

"Isn't it confusing?"

"Sometimes." Taka nodded. "That's why this family is so important to me, Hikari-chan. It's the constant that both Tamahome and Taka have — Miaka, you and Makoto. Nothing is as important to me as that... and I'm sorry you felt that we'd kept important things from you."

"It's all right." Hikari sighed again. "I... I'm not mad about that any more. I... to be honest, I was sort of... proud, to be in that world... and be... Tamahome's daughter. Even though I felt a little like Tamahome was a stranger to me... he seemed to have been... someone so important in Kounan. Everyone... everyone speaks well of you and Mother both, Dad. I guess I started to see you both a little differently, because of that."

"Well, I suppose that's all right." Taka said ruefully. "But I'm sure you have a lot of questions, and frankly, so do we. We never expected you to be pulled into that world... if we had, it might have been different."

"I don't want to go back." Hikari said quietly, fingering the stains on her skirt as she did so. "Dad, something... terrible happened, before I found myself suddenly back in the library. And I... it was my fault. I... I'm no good for Kounan after all. I..."

Taka eyed her thoughtfully, and Hikari shook her head.

"I don't even think I can talk about it." She murmured. "Not... right now. I... I'm just... glad to be home."

"Not as glad as I am to see you." Taka assured her, flicking on the indicator as he turned onto the forecourt of the apartment complex. "Or as glad as Miaka will be to see you, either. She was about beside herself... we felt you'd come back, but when the phone rang... it's been the longest day in history, today."

"Day?" Hikari started. "I've been away... a day?"

"Yes." Taka agreed. "Twenty four hours, more or less."

“Chichiri did say time moves differently there from here.” Hikari bit her lip. “But I didn’t think... I was in their world almost three weeks, I think. But here... here it’s just been... one day?”

“It works like that.” Taka told her. “The flow of time between this world and that one is diverse... and it isn’t always constant. I don’t know how it works, to be honest. A day here can be a week there, or a month, or even three months. But you must have been somehow outside of time, Hikari-chan — because otherwise, how was it possible for you to be with Chichiri and Tasuki? Am I right in thinking that you... went back in time somehow, in their world?”

Hikari nodded slowly.

“I think so.” She agreed. “Chichiri said... it was because... because I was the Shinzahou, and I... went back to where they were. Where they could protect me. And they... have. They were good to me, Dad. Especially Chichiri. He and his family...”

She closed her eyes, unable to continue as suddenly an image of Meikyo’s innocent, trusting smile flashed into her head.

“Stay a long time, all right?”

The young girl’s words echoed in her mind, and she shook her head, trying to clear it.

“I’m sorry, Mei-chan.” She whispered. “I couldn’t stay any longer... I couldn’t.”

“Hikari?” Taka sent her a concerned glance, and Hikari opened her eyes.

“Nothing.” She said softly. “I just... I’m home now. Right? It’s over. It’s behind me.”

She frowned, biting her lip as she remembered the scene in the shrine in Sairou.

“I... I’m back... where I belong.”

Chapter 15

Chapter Fourteen

They had made good progress.

Hyoushin gazed pensively out across the busy city of Hengei, a thoughtful look in his gaze as he leant up against the window of the tavern they had taken rooms in just an hour or two earlier. Although it was not directly on their path back to the port of Kaidou, Hyoushin had wanted to avoid the path through Eiroku and the angry townspeople, and so they had taken a diversion, sweeping south-east as they made their way back home.

“It would almost be easier to cross the southern lands, and leave the boat completely.” He reflected. “But I dare not do that... not if there is something in the South that we don’t understand. This girl — this Hikari. I must ask the Emperor’s opinion... but I feel... that there’s something we must learn before we worry about venturing towards our most recent bitter rivals.”

He turned from the window, settling down on the end of the bed as he pulled the charmed mirror from his belt. As he did so, he caught sight of the pouch holding yet another mirror — the blessed treasure of Byakko — and a faint smile touched his lips.

“But we have succeeded.” he reflected. “Miramu’s presence may have been a trial, and there have been things he has not willingly divulged to us. But in the end, we have what we need. The result is the same... I should not concern myself overly with assassins that keep their skeletons in their closets.”

He brushed his hand over the surface of Kikei’s mirror, gazing into it as the hazy depths began to clear.

“Kintsusei-sama?” He said softly. “It’s Hyoushin, making report.”

“Hyoushin!” The Emperor’s voice came back clear and strong, and little by little the man’s face became visible in the glistening glass. “I’ve been waiting to hear from you — I was beginning to worry about the lack of communication!”

“My sincere apologies, my Lord. We had a few small diversions on our journey which made it difficult.” Hyoushin said slowly. “But all is well. We have obtained both the Byakko Shinzahou and the relic from

the shrine... the fang of Byakko which contains the power of the mage spirit Kitora. These both we are bringing back to you. At present we are in a town near the southern border — we were forced to take a different route back to the port, so our return may be delayed a day or two. However, we are making good time, and I anticipate it won't be more than a day's ride on the morrow to rejoin the ship and set sail."

"You have succeeded?" There was no keeping the relief from the Emperor's voice. "Then I have nothing to fear. This is good news indeed, Hyoushin — another step closer to Kutou's salvation."

"I trust so, Heika."

"You're still determined not to commit yourself on that subject, aren't you?" Kintsusei reproached him, and Hyoushin offered a faint smile.

"I am not a man of the beast Gods." He agreed. "But I believe in my Emperor's will. You need not worry. We will bring the treasures back to Kutou in safety."

"Miramu has not been a problem?"

"No more of one than I anticipated." Hyoushin considered. "He has not been entirely open with us about his connections to Byakko's guardian Toroki, but even so, he was able to lead us to the treasure and retrieve the fang from the shrine himself. Although I must report to you, Kintsusei-sama, that I have been unable to prevent him from killing anyone on our trip West. I believe representatives of Suzaku were also here — and one of these Miramu appears to have slain in Byakko's shrine."

Kintsusei frowned, biting his lip.

"That is less good news." He admitted.

"It appears the man he slew was no more than one of the bandits associated with the Seishi known as Tasuki." Hyoushin continued. "I am not pleased that any blood was shed, but unfortunately I was not present during this particular squabble... I do not know the precise nature of the conflict. I do not believe the boy was important enough to create serious implications for Kutou — like as not Reizeitei-sama is not aware of individual bandits. But I take responsibility for the death — I was not able to prevent the killer from indulging in his favourite pastime after all."

"Well, if it stopped at just one, I suppose we should be grateful." Kintsusei sighed. "And Suzaku's people were definitely in Sairou, also?"

“More, they have sought the assistance of Byakko’s guardian, Toroki.” Hyoushin hesitated, then, “She possesses a strange power that somewhat concerns me... I would rather not have my men exposed to her wiles and spells if it could be avoided. I think she could possibly cause significant mental damage, if she was to attack someone who was not expecting it.”

“That sounds sinister indeed!”

“Well, there’s little surprise in that.” Hyoushin’s lips curled slightly as he remembered what he had learnt. “It appears that Toroki is Miramu’s younger sister... there must simply be a sadistic streak in their family’s blood.”

“Siblings...” Kintsusei sighed. “I see. It explains how Miramu knew so well the location, then. Are we caught in the midst of a family feud, Hyoushin?”

“Perhaps, but Miramu is returning to Kutou with us and you can ask him yourself to explain his motives and conduct when we arrive.” Hyoushin replied. “Although, on that note... my Lord, there is one other matter I must address with you... another reason why I have chosen to spend tonight in Hengei instead of pushing for a more coastal location.”

“Yes?” Kintsusei sounded curious. “What is it?”

“Both Miramu and Suiko mentioned something about one of Suzaku’s travellers.” Hyoushin replied. “A girl by the name of Hikari. Unfortunately, neither one of them have been explicit. Suiko seems to degrade in memory and maturity the further she is from Kutou, and insists on playing silly games at every turn. And Miramu... speaks in tongues and reveals only the things he wants you to know. I feel certain one or both of them knows more than they have told me — however, the fact they have raised the girl’s name independantly of one another makes me curious to know why.”

“One of Suzaku’s...” Kintsusei bit his lip. “One of Suzaku’s Celestial Warriors?”

“I don’t know, my Lord.” Hyoushin admitted. “To me she seems just another girl — not even so old as Maichu or Aoiketsu in years, and certainly not trained with a weapon. She seems... nothing unusual to me. But I am not an adequate judge of such things. And I would like... with your permission... to find out more. It occurs to me that this child — this Hikari — may be partly involved in the mobilisation of Suzaku’s forces. It seems convenient otherwise, that they would choose to search out Shinzahou at the same time as we are. Suiko said

in the mountains that she could sense Suzaku's magic — she thought that Suzaku's Shinzahu was there, although we found no trace of it. My theory, therefore, is that this Hikari girl may well be its protector — or at the very least, she is a key to the door of Kounan's motivation."

"Yes, so it sounds to me also." Kintsusei's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "And you think we should act, then, in the way we discussed once before? It is time to send a spy?"

"I believe it is, sire, yes."

"Then I will bow to your opinion. I think you are right." Kintsusei nodded. "You wish to send someone from your party south, instead of back to the East — don't you?"

"With your permission, my Lord, I would like to send Aoiketsu, with Maichu and Kayu as potential go-betweens." Hyoushin said slowly. "Maichu has already begged me not to force him back on the boat, and considering the miserable spectacle he made of himself on the journey here, I see this may be a better use for him... to convey messages back to Kutou. Kayu also has proven fairly competent in this trip, and I would like to add responsibility to his shoulders. He is maturing, I think... and that should be rewarded. Between the two of them they should be able to liaise with Aoiketsu and convey messages back to Kutou without creating any great suspicion — and if there are two of them, the message will be more sure to get through."

"But... Aoiketsu?" Kintsusei's eyes widened. "Isn't that a risk? If they were to discover the boy's true origins..."

"Yes, I know." Hyoushin admitted. "But in truth, of all my men, I have most faith in Maichu or Aoiketsu to carry out orders without the risk of failure or deviation. And Aoiketsu is by far the more even-tempered of the two — Maichu's impulsiveness may well put him in a position of risk. Besides, it has occurred to me that Aoiketsu's identity may well be the key thing in allowing him to infiltrate the Suzaku party unnoticed."

"Go on..."

"Aoiketsu lives under the name Kaiga Aoiketsu." Hyoushin said simply. "A noble family of Kutou eradicated to a man by the Shougun during the war with Kounan. Aoiketsu wears on his finger the ring his mother left him — the one that bears the crest of the Kaiga house. Such things cannot easily be falsified — that ring belonged to Kaiga Gin, and the fact Aoiketsu has it is indication enough of his Kaiga connections."

He frowned.

“He also has the appearance of a noble son, if not dressed in the armour of a fighting man.” He added. “He has been raised more or less at Kutou’s court, and even though he has trained as a soldier from an early age, he has benefitted from the same tuition a son of your own would receive, on account of his mother’s dying wishes. Being raised in such proximity to the crown, he also knows much of the politics of office. He is literate, educated and intelligent... even a noble son in exile could expect to have such attributes. In all things, his perceived identity is the perfect foil to convince Suzaku of his authenticity. After all, even within Kutou only a very few individuals know the truth of his origins. Aoiketsu is unaware of them himself, for that matter. Why would strangers in Kounan be any more perceptive? And he cannot give away to them things he does not know.”

“Yes, I do see what you mean.” Kintsusei agreed. “In that light, it wouldn’t be obvious... who he really was. And since he knows the story of the Kaiga family as well or better than anyone...”

“Well, it occurred to me that I am Kounan’s enemy, and so are you.” Hyoushin said evenly. “And, additionally, we were both involved in the downfall of the Kaiga family, in one way or another. An outward observer would see many reasons for an orphaned Kaiga child to have grievances against the Emperor and his chief military officer. You were a soldier involved in the raid. I was a Kaiga slave. And the family was wiped out, the land taken first as the Shougun’s domain, and then, later, as your own. Disinherited, orphaned and exiled... there is enough truth in such a story to be convincing.”

“Indeed there is.” Kintsusei nodded. “Kaiga Gin’s evil ways were legendary within Kutou... the cleansing of the estate was, in my view, a necessary atrocity to break my father’s stranglehold on power. But to an outsider... I suppose it must simply represent the brutality they automatically associate with this realm.”

“My thinking precisely.” Hyoushin responded. “And there is one other suggestion I would make, if I may.”

“Of course.”

“I’d like to send Aoiketsu south in the company of our assassin friend.”

“Miramu?” Kintsusei’s eyes opened wide with surprise. “But why? I thought you didn’t trust him.”

“I don’t, but I do trust that Aoiketsu is a good enough soldier to

protect himself if need be.” Hyoushin replied. “Besides, they have spent time alone together without harm befalling Aoiketsu, so I am not concerned for his safety. In truth, I think Miramu has rather latched on to Aoiketsu in some way — he seems unusually interested in him, and has on a couple of occasions divulged information that he has not given to you or I. I cannot explain the workings of it, but I think, in some twisted way, Miramu has taken to Aoiketsu. And that can only work in our favour.”

“Taken to him?” Kintsusei looked disturbed. “Do you mean what I think you mean?”

“Possibly.” Hyoushin shrugged. “It is no secret that Aoiketsu is a handsome young soldier, after all, and he is often teased by his fellow soldiers for his ‘pretty’ looks. But you needn’t have concerns in that regard. Aoiketsu’s focus has always been on Kutou’s safety — and on the few occasions when it has wavered at all, his tastes have not swung in that direction. There is no danger of him becoming entangled in something inappropriate. However, I do not like Miramu or his *modus operandi*. And I seek to exploit any weakness in it to our best effect wherever possible. Whatever his interest in Aoiketsu — whether it be physical or something else — I do believe that he won’t cause him harm. And that if Aoiketsu was to travel south in Miramu’s company, he may well be better positioned to explain his presence in Kounan.”

A faint smile touched his lips.

“Miramu has killed a man of the south, after all.” He murmured. “If he were to be perceived as causing Aoiketsu a similar threat, then surely Suzaku’s people would be only too glad to take his part.”

“You have been thinking deviously.” Kintsusei’s expression became one of comprehension and he grinned. “I see exactly what you are getting at. And yes, you are right. If we are to send a spy, he must be someone the South can believe. I think your plan is the best one, Hyoushin. You may act on it — you have my blessing.”

“Thank you.” Hyoushin inclined his head slightly in acknowledgement. “Then tomorrow I will brief the men on their new orders. And we will discover what secrets the south are hiding before we worry about tackling them... we do not want another war with Kounan if we can avoid it, and I have hopes that if anyone can root out the truth, it will be Kaiga Aoiketsu.”

“Aniki, are we just going to spend our whole morning on this

ridge?”

As Kouji and his group of companions crossed the uneven mountain terrain, one of the younger members of the group piped in a question, causing the tall, scar-faced bandit to turn, eying him quizzically. It was early morning on Reikaku-zan, another bright day which would turn hot as the sun climbed higher in the sky, and as ever, the men of the mountain were busy with their morning tasks. For Kouji and his two young associates, this was collecting toll, although for the scar-faced bandit, keeping the youngsters' excitement and impatience under wraps was proving to be a more troublesome job than he had first anticipated.

“You'd like to lead the party, would you?” He challenged. “We're taking toll, we're not going for a leisurely stroll around the mountain side. You want to do that, you take it up with Genrou — but don't expect me to be puttin' the parts of you back together afterwards. You know as well as I do that takings have been low in the last week or two — an' we have obligations. It ain't just us we gotta feed, you know... if you've got issues with that, you can always find another mountain to pitch on.”

“Hey, I wasn't saying that.” The young bandit held up his hands hurriedly. “I just wondered... we ain't seen anyone comin' along this trackway for a long time.”

“Well, we ain't seen anyone usin' any of the mountain paths for a while.” Kouji sighed, gazing up at the sky. It was true, he reflected. Since the day he and his Seishi companion had first discussed the re-emergence of Suzaku's mark, takings on the mountain had slipped to the barest minimum, and Kouji's thoughts slipped as they often did to the struggling inhabitants in some of the poorer mountain villages. As a child of the mountains himself, Kouji had always taken a keen interest in Reikaku-zan's community obligations, and in this he knew he and Tasuki were of one mind.

After all, he reflected, the Kashira was as much a boy of this rough terrain as he was.

“But if we can't even feed ourselves fully, we're gonna have a job providin' for others.” He acknowledged with a sigh. “Maybe Kaouzan's responsible... perhaps they're settin' up path blocks again. It would help if Genrou's mind was on somethin' other than the fact the cub's somewhere in the wilds of Sairou — but I guess I can't blame him. I'm worried about the kid too — it's a lot of responsibility for a brat like that, an' Shishi's only a kid of fourteen. Younger even than Genrou was when he came to Reikaku-zan. Still... I understand he

doesn't want to launch in on Kaou-zan whilst Suzaku's buzzin' round his brain. But if this goin' to be a problem — supplies in some of the villages are already short, an' there's rumours of disease in one of the furthestmost ones. Since Genrou took hold o' the mountain, the people've relied on us to take care of them when somethin' strikes... Genrou's a symbol of Suzaku to them, after all. Their protector, an' he takes it to heart. But right now... he ain't with the program. I know he thinks the world of that cub — but even so..."

"Aniki, I think I hear horses!" A young bandit by the name of Ueji hissed excitedly at this point, jerking Kouji back to the present, and the older bandit frowned, listening carefully with expert ears to the sounds of the mountain. He nodded his head.

"Two, an' coming this way." He agreed. "Be ready, all of you... we don't know what we're dealin' with yet, so hold off on the blades till we know. If they're willin' to pay toll without causin' us any trouble, we won't be causin' them any, after all."

"I hope they cause trouble." The impetuous youngster who had spoken earlier put in. "I could use a good fight."

"You'll get yourself killed before you know it, thinking that way." Kouji said disparagingly. "You could stand t'take a few lessons on patience, Raiku. It's only by luck alone that noone's pushed a blade through you yet — if you want to live to improve, you pay attention an' do as you're told."

"They're getting closer." Ueji murmured. "If they have no money, will we take their horses, Aniki? At least then we'd have something to barter in Souun for food or supplies."

"Sounds like a plan t'me." Kouji nodded. "But we'll see. If they're on horseback, they can't be completely without resources... it may be our lucky day."

"I think I can see them." Raiku squinted along the horizon. "Two... just like you said, Aniki. Over there... from the West. Are we goin' to take them by surprise, Aniki? Give them a bit of a scare to convince them not to argue with us?"

"Hang on."

As the riders came more clearly into view, Kouji raised his hand, his brow furrowing as he registered the identity of one of the riders, and he frowned, glancing from one horse to the other as if trying to understand.

"It's the cub." He breathed. "Hold back, all of you. It's Genrou's

cub... do you want t'face him if you charge her down?"

"*Shishi*?" Ueji looked startled. "But... who's the dame with her?"

"I'll find out. You stay right here... be ready to move if there's trouble." Kouji instructed. "I'm gonna find out what the hell's goin' on — do as I say and don't move till I give an order."

"Yes, Aniki." Ueji agreed, and a glare from him to his companion quieted any protestations that might have been on Raiku's lips. Kouji's lips thinned, as a sense of foreboding washed through him, but he said no more, merely slipping out from his scrub cover to face the two riders head on.

"*Shishi*?" He exclaimed, and at his voice, the young red-head halted her steed, meeting his gaze with a look of both surprise and relief. To Kouji's dismay, there were tears glittering in the bronze depths, and as the girl dismounted her horse, all her ingrained training about mountain etiquette seemed to desert her as she flung herself on the bandits' second in command, burying her head in his shoulder as her body began to shake with sobs.

"Aniue." She wept, and Kouji stared at her, unsure quite what to do with this sudden emotional outburst, for though *Shishi* had always been an expressive and impetuous young girl, she had always scorned tearful outbursts.

"Hey, kid, what is it?" He asked softly. "*Shishi*, stop this — what's happened? What's wrong?"

Shishi just continued to cry into his bandit's attire, and Kouji frowned as the girl's companion dismounted her own animal, grasping the reins of both beasts as she stepped forward.

"I'm sorry." She murmured. "I imagine you didn't expect this kind of greeting. But I thought... *Shishi* should be brought home."

"Who are you?" Kouji demanded, eyeing the white-haired stranger with wary confusion. "You ain't local — what's your story?"

"My name is Toroki." The stranger said quietly. "I'm one of Byakko's Celestial Warriors. I mean no trouble for you or your companions... I came to bring *Shishi* back to Reikaku-zan, and, I hoped, to speak to Tasuki or Chichiri in person."

Kouji's eyes narrowed, but at length he nodded.

"Ueji, go back to the base." He said softly, his glance flitting to one of his accompanying bandits. "Tell the Kashira I'm comin' back early, an' I'm bringing *Shishi* back with me. Don't tell him nothin' else —

okay? I'll deal with that."

"Yes, Aniki." The young bandit nodded his head, disappearing immediately back towards the base, and Kouji glanced down at the still sobbing Shishi that clung to him as if afraid he was about to be ripped away.

"Get a hold of yourself, girl." He murmured. "This ain't like you. What the hell's the matter?"

"Jin..." Shishi managed, raising mournful bronze eyes to her companion, and a cold chill struck deep into Kouji's heart as he interpreted the unspoken message. He cursed, glancing at the enigmatic Toroki for confirmation of his worst fear, and the woman nodded slowly.

"He lost his life defending Suzaku no Shinzahou from a dangerous enemy." She said sadly.

Kouji cursed again, then he hauled Shishi up onto her own feet, scooping her up into his arms as if she weighed no more than her younger cousin Meikyo.

"All right. I get it now." He said quietly. "We'll go inside, all right? You're home now — it's all right."

"Aniue." Shishi gazed up at him, slipping her arms around his neck as she did so, then, "I... I want Papa."

"I've already sent a message." Kouji assured her, inwardly unnerved by this uncharacteristic display of clinginess from the young bandit who had always fought fire with fire. "Pull yourself together a little, huh? You're goin' to scare him like this."

"I can't help it." Shishi leant her head up against him. "I don't like it, but I.I can't stop... cryin'. And now we're here... now we're here..."

She trailed off, and Kouji sighed, casting Toroki a glance.

"You'd better come too, though when Genrou hears this news he mightn't want you here." He said quietly. "Still, he'll want a coherent story of what happened to the kid. An' about what happened to Hikari — he'll want to know that, too, an' so will Chichiri."

"Hikari's gone back to her world." Shishi mumbled. "She glowed red again, an' vanished."

"Vanished?" Kouji blinked, and Myoume nodded.

"As Shishi said." She agreed. "And I'll come with you with pleasure."

I'm sorry to come to Kounan — and Reikaku-zan — in these circumstances."

She paused, then,

"Are you the bandit known as Kouji?" She hazarded. "Shishi calls you Aniue, and the other man, he called you Aniki. Am I right, then, in assuming you're Tasuki's second in command?"

"Yes." Kouji looked startled. "That's right."

"Then I'm glad it was you we ran into." Myoume sighed, absently touching her cheek. "I recognised you from your scar... both Jin and Shishi spoke about you and I know you're someone I can trust."

"Well, I guess that all depends on what Genrou has to say about all of this." Kouji reflected. "Come on. This way. You might as well go that far an' let him decide for himself."

"Kouji!"

As they made their way into the bandit strong-hold, a voice hailed them, edged with a rolling mountain accent, and Kouji turned to meet his superior's gaze, a mixture of relief and apprehension in his gaze. At the sound of the man's voice, Shishi struggled out of Kouji's grip and back onto her own feet.

"Papa!" She exclaimed, and the bandit leader stopped dead as he registered the state his daughter was in.

"Shit." He murmured. "Shishi? What the hell...?"

"Papa..." Shishi flung herself against the brawny red-haired bandit in much the same way as she had done Kouji, and for a moment Tasuki just stared at her, non-plussed. Then, as he seemed to register the violence of her emotions, he frowned, resting a hand on her head as he cast Kouji a questioning glance.

"Well?"

"Somethin' happened in Sairou, Genrou." Kouji said soberly. "The cub's come back alone. Well, almost... this woman came with her. She says she's Toroki — one o' Byakko's. But the Hikari kid wound up sent back to her own world, an' Jin..."

He trailed off, as colour visibly drained from the wolfish features.

"What about Jin?" The question was softly spoken, and Kouji knew that his friend had already guessed the truth.

"He was killed." Toroki herself answered the question, a sober look

in her strange seiran eyes.

For a moment there was silence, punctuated only by the occasional sob from the young girl, and at Toroki's words, Tasuki's grasp on his daughter tightened. He frowned, then slowly, he nodded his head.

"Kouji, get Anzu. Tell her nothin', jus' that I want her an' in my private quarters." He said softly. "An' then go to the village. Find Chichiri an' tell him everythin' you know. Tell him to get his ass up here as soon as he can... no matter what Aidou says about it. All right?"

"Understood." Kouji nodded. "What about you? Can you manage Shishi on your own?"

"I'll have to." Tasuki said frankly. His gaze flitted to Toroki, and his bronze eyes clouded slightly.

"You better come with me, too." He murmured. "I want to know everythin'. An' be prepared to be asked a shitload o' questions. Especially when Chichiri's here."

The stranger bowed her head, holding out her hands in a gesture of peace and submission.

"I've come ready and willing to do that." She agreed. "I'm truly sorry to be meeting you under these circumstances."

Kouji heard no more, for he withdrew from the chamber at that moment, biting his lip as he got his own composure under control. Jin had been a great favourite among the bandits, and he knew that it would not just be the wolf's family who would feel the loss keenly.

"But Genrou sees... saw him like a son, an' Anzu scarcely any different." He muttered. "What the hell did happen in the West, anyway? Shit... what kind of danger is there in a peaceful land that causes a kid like Jin to be killed anyway? What the hell is *wrong* with this world?"

"Well, at least she's safely back here."

As Taka set down the telephone receiver, he cast his wife a rueful smile, nodding his head. It had been just over an hour since Hikari's return home and, after a tearful reunion with her mother, the young girl had quietly asked to have a bath, taking a fresh towel and heading up the stairs to clean up her dishevelled, desert-dusty appearance. Left alone downstairs, Taka had quickly put a call through to his brother in law to notify him of the girl's safe return, and now, as they sat in the

small Sukunami sitting room, he realised that the overwhelming sensation was one of relief.

“She’s back, and it’s over.” He murmured. “Miaka, I’ve never been so glad to see anyone as I was glad to see Hikari in that library office. She said that three weeks passed in the book world — she must have been terrified, thrown into a situation like that. But she’s come back — and thank goodness, she’s in one piece.”

“Do you really think so?” Miaka frowned, her expression uncharacteristically thoughtful, and Taka’s brows drew together as he interpreted his wife’s uneasiness. He frowned, reaching out to take her by the hand as he sat down beside her on the sofa.

“What’s on your mind, Miaka?” He asked quietly. “Something is — I know that look. Something about Hikari’s homecoming?”

“Did you see her, when she came in?” Miaka asked hesitantly. “Taka, you must have noticed it... how she looked.”

“She was shaken up.” Taka agreed. “But I can’t blame her for that. Considering...”

“No.” Miaka shook her head, heaving a sigh as she pursed her lips. “No, it’s not that, Taka. Her clothing. Did you notice?”

“Well, she’s dressed like she’s from Ancient China, but she was in Kounan. That’s not unusual — you did it yourself, so I seem to remember.”

“I did, and that’s not what I’m getting at either.” Miaka sat back in her seat. “Taka... there was blood on her skirt. Did you not notice it? I’m sure that’s what it was.”

“Blood?” Taka looked startled. “Do you think she’s hurt?”

“Yes, but not in the way you’re thinking.” Miaka looked troubled. “What was it she said to you in the car, Taka? That something had happened?”

“Something horrible.” Taka’s brows drew together in consternation as he considered the implications in his companion’s words. “And that it was her fault. But she didn’t want to talk about it, so I didn’t press her. I didn’t notice the blood at all — to be honest, I was so relieved to see her, I don’t think I took anything else in.”

“Well, I did.” Miaka frowned. “She’s back here, for sure. But Taka, something’s upset her. Something happened in Kounan. And whatever it is, it’s worrying her.”

She chewed on her lip.

“This is our fault.” She added. “Mine especially, for making her Suzaku’s Shinzahou. Whatever she’s been through, I have to take some of the blame. And it worries me, seeing her looking like that.”

“It’s not your fault.” Taka shook his head, and Miaka shrugged her shoulders.

“I feel like it is.” She murmured. “A lot’s happened in the last twenty four hours — for Hikari, it’s been a lot longer. Whatever it is she’s been through, I want her to know that she can talk to us. We’ll try and understand — we’re probably the only ones who really can, aside from maybe Yui or Mayo. But you and I in particular.”

She hesitated, then got to her feet.

“I’m going to go speak to her.” She decided. “I’ll ask her if she wants anything to eat... it is late, after all. And then we’ll see. If she’s not up to it, Taka, we shouldn’t try and send her to school tomorrow — it won’t hurt, if she’s really upset. And even if she isn’t... even if she’s not as shaken as I think she is — we still have things to talk about. Keisuke’s money, for example.”

“She told me she was sorry and that she wouldn’t do it again.” Taka shook his head. “No harm was done, so I vote we forget about that, Miaka.”

“Maybe you’re right, if that’s the case.” Miaka acknowledged. “To be honest, I don’t want to tackle her on that kind of note at the moment. Call it mother’s intuition, Taka, but something’s badly upset our daughter’s heart — and I won’t be happy till I’ve got to the bottom of what it is.”

“You want to talk to her alone?” Taka realised, and Miaka nodded.

“Mother to daughter.” She agreed, relief flickering in her hazel eyes. “Yes. Thank you for understanding. After all, it’s occurred to me that maybe we haven’t had that kind of a conversation for a while. And perhaps that’s been part of the problem.”

She offered her husband a smile.

“Now I can share with her a lot of things I never could before.” She added. “Maybe just knowing I understand will help — it’s worth a try.”

With that she was gone, and Taka sank back in his seat, pursing his lips as he considered Miaka’s uncharacteristic burst of perceptiveness.

“Maybe she’s right. Maybe in the end, it is our fault.” He reflected. “For keeping secrets... for not being truly ourselves with either Hikari or Makoto. I don’t know... how could we have explained it to them? I don’t see how it would have worked out... but in some ways, maybe she doesn’t feel she can talk to us in the way she should be able to. I don’t know what happened in that world — but if Miaka can reach out to her, so much the better. After all, even now she’s back, if something’s still troubling her, it will be a while before she really gets over her trip into the Shijin-Tenchishou.”

Chapter 16

Chapter Fifteen

“All right, Shishi, that’s enough of that.”

Once inside the Kashira’s private quarters, Tasuki disentangled his daughter from his body, setting her gently down in an empty seat as he crouched before her. “Stop it. Stop crying like that. I want to talk to you... I want to know what happened in Sairou. About Jin. I need you to tell me.”

Shishi stared at him blankly for a moment, and Tasuki bit his lip.

“I need you to report back to me on what happened, Shishi.” He murmured. “As Kashira, I gotta know, an’ I want it from you.”

Something in this seemed to stir some life into the young girl’s bronze eyes, and she sighed heavily, sinking back against the seat as she did so.

“I’m sorry.” She murmured. “I can’t help it... reactin’ like this. I can’t... help it.”

“Jus’ tell me what went on in Sairou, huh?”

“We were... in the shrine.” Shishi’s voice wavered slightly, and she chewed on her lip as if to prevent a fresh storm of tears. “We got to Toroki too late t’get the Shinzahou, because... because I was stupid an’ got into a fight with some city drunks. So we were playin’ catch-up an’ Toroki... Myoume, she said she’d help us. We were goin’...she said to stay away from Kitora’s shrine. That it was dangerous. But we... we were tryin’ to get the Shinzahou. An’ we ended up there by accident. An... an’ we came face to face with... with... with that bastard assassin, Papa. With M... Miramu. And he...”

She closed her eyes, and Tasuki cursed, clenching his fists as anger surged through him.

“Miramu.” He muttered darkly. “Shit. I should’ve guessed he had a hand in this, after what he did to Meikyo.”

Shishi nodded, opening her eyes.

“He was protectin’ Hiki.” She whispered. “Jin was. Miramu... Miramu attacked her when she tried to get the fang. An... an’ Jin was

hurt gettin' in his way. Then Myoume found us, an' Miramu disappeared. But he's Amefuri, Papa. He's a Celestial Warrior like Myoume is. An' if she hadn't come then, I think... I think he'd've tried t'kill Hiki an' me, too. We tried to help Jin, but... but we... we couldn't. An... an' when he died, Hiki freaked out. Like she did before... she glowed all red an' vanished, and Myoume said she wasn't in Sairou any more. So... so she said she'd take m... me home. An'... she has."

She buried her head in her hands, and Tasuki sighed getting to his feet as he turned to glance at the stranger who still hovered uncertainly by the door.

"You brought my daughter home." He said softly. "An' you tried to protect them all. That's true?"

"Yes." The woman nodded, looking troubled.

"You are Toroki, then?"

The stranger nodded again, slipping the black glove from her right hand as she stretched her fingers out towards him. Even from that distance, Tasuki could see the glitter of white against her skin, and he frowned.

"I haven't come to Kounan to cause you or your friends grief or trouble. If I could have prevented Jin's death, I would've done, Tasukisan." The woman added in gentle, regretful tones. "My stellar name is Toroki, but I prefer to be known by my given name — Geiyo Myoume — because at present I really don't feel worthy of the Celestial title Byakko gave me. Not only have I lost the treasure I was born to protect, I've allowed terrible harm to come to someone who I dearly wanted to protect. And I've come here to offer my help and my Seishi magic to you and your cause... to repay the blood debt of Jin's death in any way I can."

"Blood debt?" Tasuki's eyes narrowed, and Myoume nodded.

"Miramu... Amefuri... is my older brother." She whispered. "Although we are quite estranged and I have not spoken properly with him since I was ten years old. Even so, the Geiyo family are responsible for your loss, and as such, I accept the duty of repayment... even though I know that it's not something that can be repaid."

She frowned.

"Jin himself said that you were like his real family." She murmured. "So much so that he didn't care who truly sired him. And I

know that Shishi feels she's lost a brother as well as a friend. This is an emotion I understand well... because even though he still lives, my brother is far out of my reach."

Tasuki digested this for a moment, fighting against the irrational anger that longed to pour out against the hapless stranger. At length he got his impetuous temper under control, and he sighed, shaking his head.

"You ain't the one who struck him down." He said quietly. "If you had been, there's no way Shishi'd have spent a moment in your company. No way in hell. If she trusts you, so do I. But..."

He faltered, aware of his own rising emotions.

"Jin was like my son." He murmured. "An' that's somethin' you can't replace or repay, no matter what you do."

"I realise that." Myoume nodded gravely. "But I can at least pledge myself to Kounan's cause. I think that, in some respects, it's the same cause as my own, anyway."

She glanced at her hands, sliding the black glove back over her exposed stellar mark.

"My family have arranged for Jin to be brought back here. We rode on ahead, but he should be here tonight." She added softly. "He wanted to be here, rather than in a foreign desert — he said so, before he... he asked to come back to the mountain. When my people understood what had happened, they agreed to help. For your sake, and Shishi's, I wanted to... to do that, at least. To have his wishes honoured, and to bring him home."

Tasuki stared at her, then he nodded.

"He belongs here." He agreed. "I'm glad you decided that. An' I'm grateful for it."

"Genrou?"

The door of the chamber opened at that moment to reveal an anxious Anzu, and Tasuki steeled himself, turning to hold out his hands to her.

"Anzu..." He murmured, and Anzu's eyes flickered with anxiety that only grew as she registered the sorry state of her only daughter huddled on the seat before her.

"What in hell's happened?" She murmured. "Shishi, are you all right? Has someone hurt you?"

“She’s fine.” Tasuki shook his head. “Jus’ shook up. An’ I won’t pretend I ain’t, either. Anzu...”

He faltered, and Anzu seemed to understand his reticence, for fear entered her dark eyes.

“Genrou, where’s Jin?” She whispered, and by way of answer, Tasuki merely shook his head. At this confirmation of her fears, Anzu let out a cry, sinking to her knees, and Tasuki bent beside her, putting a hand on her shoulder, although he was not sure he had the strength to comfort her when his own emotions were so torn.

“He died bravely.” He said at length. “Protectin’ Tama’s kid, jus’ like he swore t’me he’d do.”

“That doesn’t make it better.” Anzu’s voice shook. “No matter how brave it is, it’s still dying. It’s still him not being here... I *told* you that sending them into the mountain alone would end up like this!”

There was an accusatory note in her tones, and Tasuki grimaced, for he had been inwardly berating himself just as strongly for allowing his hand to be forced.

“Blame Taiitsukun. It was her who said it.” He responded. “An’ believe me, I’m gonna give her a piece o’ my mind when I see her. I ain’t happy about this either, Anzu. I’m as cut up as you or Shishi... he was my son too, y’know. He’s always been that.”

He gestured to Myoume.

“Her family have arranged for him to be brought back to the mountain.” He added soberly. “So at least he’ll be buried here, on Reikaku-zan, where he belongs. An’ we’ll make sure that it’s as good a burial as ol’ Hakurou-sama... that there ain’t a way for people t’forget. Because you an’ I an’ Shishi — we sure as hell won’t.”

He clenched his fists, struggling to control his own emotions once more as he felt tears pricking at his bronze eyes.

“I thought I was past this point o’ buryin’ those I loved.” He murmured. “I guess Suzaku’s people never stop doin’ that particular thing.”

“He wanted... me to tell you... he did his best.” Shishi whispered at that point, and Tasuki stared at her, meeting his daughter’s identical bronze eyes with his own troubled ones. “To protect Hiki an’ me. And he did, Papa. He... he really did.”

“I ain’t doubtin’ it.” Despite himself, Tasuki managed a faint, fleeting smile. “He was made of good, strong stuff, after all. An’ Kouji

an' me, we trained him well."

Shishi drew a shuddering breath of air into her lungs.

"I don't feel very well." She admitted slowly. "I can't snap out of this... it's like, comin' home... has made it ten times worse. I never realised how much I... rely on Jin... an' how much I'm used to him always bein' there. I don't know... what to do without him."

"Right now, you ain't bein' asked to do anythin'." Tasuki told her softly. "But I want you to try an' be brave as you can, Shishi. It ain't nice — for anyone, when things like this happen. An' it's easy to get wrecked inside when they do. But... sometimes... there ain't nothin' you can do for Jin by cryin' for him. You know that, right? There ain't nothin' any of us can do for him that way. So... try an' stop cryin'. Please, kid. At least for your mother's sake... try."

"Okaasan?" Shishi frowned, turning to glance at her mother. "I... I'm sorry. I didn't mean... to be a pain."

"If you want to cry, Shishi, you cry." Anzu said quietly. "Jin was important to you — it's all right. Don't worry about me — it's something you have to get out of your system in your own way and in your own time."

"I've sent Kouji for Chichiri." Tasuki put in at this point. "An' I expect we'll be tacklin' Taiitsukun about all of this. Hikari as much as anything. An' with any luck she'll be givin' us a better idea of our next play."

"You're not saying that this is going to carry on?" Anzu shot him a horrified look. "That you — or Shishi — are going to take off from the mountain again, with Jin dead?"

"What the hell else is there to do?" Tasuki asked helplessly. "Anzu, I'm Suzaku's Tasuki. Whatever the hell I feel about it, if Kounan is at risk, I don't have a friggin' choice in the matter. You know that. You've been with me long enough to understand what it means. It doesn't mean I'm happy with the idea — especially not if Shishi's going to be involved. But there ain't nothing else to be done about it. When Jin comes home, well, we'll give him a proper bandit funeral. We'll bury him an' make sure he gets all the trimmings that Hakurou-sama an' Reirei had when they sacrificed their lives for Reikaku-zan. There ain't anything the hell else I can do but that... I can't bring him back."

Anzu bit her lip, fresh tears welling in her dark eyes as this.

"You really don't understand, sometimes, how a mother feels." She

murmured, and Tasuki's eyes darkened. Slowly he shook his head.

"I understand how a *father* feels." He said frankly. "But I've been here before. I buried Nuriko. Chiriko. Mitsukake. Hotohori-sama. I saw each of them give their life for Kounan's survival. Jin wasn't a Celestial Warrior, but he always had the heart of one. He's just proved it, that's all. An' if we were to give up — if we were to jus' let it go at this — he would've died for no damn reason. He did this believin' it was the right thing to do — that protectin' Hikari an' Shishi was the most important thing to do. An' because of that, we have to damn well honour his sacrifice properly. As a father, Anzu, I'm as torn up as you are. As Kashira, I'm pissed off as hell. As Tasuki..."

He paused, glancing at his daughter briefly, then clenching his fists in determination.

"As Tasuki, I'm damn well goin' to make sure we protect Kounan." He said fiercely. "Chichiri an' me both. For Jin's sake, it's the only thing we can do. *All* of us. An' that means talkin' to Taiitsukun, talkin' to Chichiri an' workin' out how to bring Hikari back here."

He cast Myoume a quizzical look.

"You said you'd swear yourself to Kounan's cause." He remembered. "Are you willing to give it everything you have? Even though you're Byakko's, are you willing to die for Suzaku's sake?"

Myoume was silent for a moment. Then she spread her hands.

"Suzaku's cause *is* Byakko's cause." She said softly. "And I am willing to sacrifice my life if it means the salvation of people in all four lands. I have seen something more terrible than the war your country suffered against Kutou... more terrible than anything else that has ever hit this world. And I am sworn to do all I can to prevent it. Besides..."

She frowned, then,

"I *know* my future." She added evenly. "I know I'm destined to fight someone who will likely show me no mercy when we finally cross paths. If I continue to fight to prevent the end of existence, it will probably cost me my life anyway. These things I have known for many, many years. Yes, Tasuki-san. I am willing to give my life for Suzaku."

She looked sad.

"Jin knew what he was doing, when he died." She added softly. "I warned him — I had told him the omen that I'd seen, about his death

should he be in the shrine when the moon rose over the mountains. He knew all of that, and yet he still insisted on fighting. Because of that, I can't possibly back away from this. He went to his death certain that if he sacrificed himself, Hikari would be safe. And if Hikari was safe, this whole world could be saved. He said as much... and I think he's right. This is much bigger than the life of one person, no matter whether he's a bandit, an Emperor or a Celestial Warrior of a Beast God."

"Myoume's right. He did... he did say that." Shishi admitted. "He did say that if Hiki was safe... this world could still be saved. But then Hiki disappeared..."

"So the next step is to find out if we can bring her back." Tasuki forced his mind away from his grief, biting his lip. "Dammit, where the hell is Chichiri!"

"I'm right here, Tasuki-kun."

The soft, familiar tones of his friend startled him as Chichiri materialised in the centre of the bandit's private quarters, a troubled look on his own scarred features as his good eye flitted briefly between Anzu and Shishi before resting on the bandit leader himself.

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting... Meikyo was with me when Kouji arrived and when I realised the nature of his visit, I had to send her off out of the way. For now, she and Eiju don't need to know about this... specifically not Hikari's disappearance. I think it would hurt them, you know, if they thought she was in trouble."

He cast Myoume a thoughtful look, then, slowly, he inclined his head.

"Toroki, I presume?" He asked softly. Myoume nodded.

"And you're Ri Hou Jun. Chichiri." She murmured. "The sorcerer with one eye... we've met before in my visions, although until now they didn't mean very much to me at all. My name is Geiyo Myoume... Myoume. At present, the last thing I want to do is assume my stellar identity, considering the circumstances."

"Never mind that." Tasuki said impatiently. "What are we going to do now? Hikari's disappeared back to her world — Chichiri, you're the spell-caster. How the hell do we bring her back?"

"We can't." Chichiri said evenly, and Tasuki frowned.

"What the hell do you mean, we can't?"

"What I said." Chichiri spread his hands helplessly. "I can't cast a

spell like that, Tasuki. I'm strong, but not that strong. And besides... Hikari is the only one with the power to travel over the divide in the way she did before. She has to choose to come back — and to find the strength inside of her to do it. I can't do anything about it. It's in her hands."

Tasuki cursed, banging his fist against the wall in his frustration, and Chichiri frowned.

"I'm sorry for Jin's loss." He said softly. "For all of you. I know what he was to you, Tasuki-kun."

"Papa says we need to carry on. For his sake." Shishi murmured, and Chichiri eyed her keenly.

"It's rough on you too, isn't it, Shishi-chan?" He asked keenly. "To lose your partner in crime like that. But Tasuki's right, you know. Jin would want that, too. He understood probably better than any of us what was at stake, when he did what he did."

"I... I know that." Shishi admitted, reaching up to dry her eyes as best she could. "I'm sorry to cry so much. I just... he was my brother, and I... I loved him. I just didn't realise how much till now, I guess. I've never really been without him backin' me up, an' I don't know..."

She sighed.

"An' Hiki bein' gone sucks too." She added. "But I think... I know why she went. Before she vanished, there was all that red light again. An' she was screamin' about... how Jin shouldn't have died for her. How it was... her fault. That's what she thought... I think that's why she went home."

"Because she blames herself for Jin's death?" Chichiri asked quietly, and Shishi nodded.

"Yes."

"Do *you* blame her, Shishi-chan?"

"No..." Shishi faltered, then shook her head. "No. It wasn't... it wasn't her fault. Jin... knew what he was doing. He... he chose to... Myoume warned him, but... the only one to blame is... that bastard assassin. That bastard *Amefuri*. Noone else."

"Amefuri." Chichiri's lips thinned, and he glanced at Myoume once again.

"Your compatriot... the assassin Miramu, correct?" He asked evenly, and Myoume nodded her head, guilt flickering in her indigo

eyes.

“My brother.” She agreed sadly. “I’m sorry for his actions, Chichiri-san. I’m truly, truly sorry for what he’s done.”

“The guilt is not yours.” Chichiri shook his head. “But the knowledge that he was a Seishi... I wish we had had that information before we let the kids leave Kounan.”

“I’m going to rip chunks from Taiitsukun when we see her.” Tasuki said blackly. “I ain’t kidding, Chichiri. You may have’ta hold me back — the tessens’s wantin’ to take this out on somethin’, an’ she seems a damn good target. She must have known who Miramu really was. She must have known what the risks were. She must have, dammit!”

Chichiri’s good eye narrowed, and he pursed his lips.

“She told Hikari that she and her companions should listen to Toroki’s advice, and heed it... or they would regret it.” He said slowly. “Toroki — no, Myoume-san — you told Jin the risks of fighting Amefuri. Is that what Shishi said? You warned him that he would die, if he faced your brother?”

“Yes.” Myoume agreed. Chichiri sighed.

“Taiitsukun’s warning holds some merit, then.” He realised. “If only she didn’t so like speaking in tongues.”

“Damn right.” Tasuki agreed. He sighed heavily, leaning back against the wall of the chamber as he folded his arms across his chest.

“All right, this is the deal.” He said softly. “Myoume’s family are makin’ sure that Jin... comes home. An’ dammit, he’s gettin’ buried on the mountain like a proper Reikaku-zan hero, no doubt about that. So till that’s done, noone’s doin’ a damn thing else. Till he’s safely here, an’ properly honoured for it, we ain’t goin’ anywhere else.”

“Tasuki...?” Chichiri shot him a quizzical look, and Tasuki frowned.

“He was my son, Chichiri.” He said quietly. “As Kashira an’ as a father, there ain’t anythin’ else I can do for him but that. So I’ll do it — before I do anythin’ else. Jin comes first. This time.”

Chichiri eyed him for a moment, then, slowly, he nodded, and Tasuki knew the sorcerer had understood.

“Until Hikari returns, there’s not much we can do anyway.” He said evenly. “I can’t bring her back here. I don’t even know if I can make contact with her — without something of hers, I really don’t know.”

“Hiki still has Hotohori-sama’s sword.” Shishi remembered. “Would

that help? Could she use that... to bring her back?"

"Maybe — if she realises it, and wants to come." Chichiri rubbed his temples. "Her feelings have to be taken into account here, too. Hikari stayed originally to try and help protect people here. Jin's death was probably a huge blow to her, too. And if she feels to blame... she might not want to come back here. I don't know if I can make contact with Hotohori-sama's *shinken* — although I'm more than willing to try."

"Wait a minute!" Shishi's eyes widened, and Tasuki saw a faint flicker of the girl's usual spirit flare into their bronze depths. "What about *this*?"

She held up her right arm, and Chichiri's eyes widened as he registered the black object wound around her wrist.

"Where did you get that, Shishi?" He asked softly, and Shishi frowned, fumbling with the catch as she loosened it, turning it over in her hands before holding it out to her uncle.

"Hiki dropped it when Miramu went for her." She said. "I picked it up, because it was hers. And I guess I wasn't thinking — I figured she'd want it back. She always wears it — like it's something important to her. So... I brought it back with me."

"What the hell is that? Some kind of other world bracelet?" Tasuki looked blank, and Chichiri shook his head, taking the watch from Shishi's outstretched hand and glancing at it before slipping it into the folds of his own clothing.

"It's a timepiece. A watch, I think she called it." He replied. "More importantly, though, it's something that has a connection to Hikari's world. I used it once before to contact Taka, to let him know Hikari was safe. Maybe, if I focus all my magic, I might be able to do the same again. It's not an easy spell to cast, and it will take time to prepare. But... I'm willing to try. Even if I can only speak to her for a few minutes. If she knows that we need her — maybe it'll be enough to bring her back."

"Then you do that." Tasuki nodded. "You worry about bringing the kid back to Kounan... an' dammit, make sure she knows noone blames her for what happens. It's as Shishi said — the only one who needs roastin' for it is that bastard Miramu. An' one of these days, I swear I'll speak for him for this... if I ever set eyes on him again, it'll be the last time he ever does anything."

He brushed his finger against his tessen as he spoke, half wishing

the irreverent Amefuri was right in front of him that instant, so that he could take his pent up emotions out on him.

“If that’s how it is, then Shishi and I will begin to prepare things for Jin’s arrival.” Anzu said quietly, holding out her hand to her daughter, and slowly, Shishi got to her feet. “As you said, Genrou, it’s all we can do for him now.”

“And you’d better come back to the village with me, Myoume-san.” Chichiri cast the Byakko Seishi a glance. “There are a few things I’d like to ask you.”

Well, so she was back home.

Hikari sank down onto the end of her bed, rubbing her towel absently through her thick damp hair as she gazed blankly at her reflection in the mirror. A stranger seemed to stare back at her, and she frowned, flopping back onto the soft bedcovers as she reflected on everything that had happened since her reappearance in the library.

“I’m home.” She whispered. “So why do I feel so... strange?”

She closed her eyes, remembering once again the events in the shrine of Kitora, and tears slipped silently down her cheeks once more as she remembered Jin’s sacrifice.

“How could you say you loved me, and then do something like that?” She murmured. “But... how could I be so *stupid*? What possessed me to jump at Miramu like that, anyway? It was like I wasn’t in control of my own body. But Shishi... Shishi will never forgive me for Jin’s death. And... and dammit, I don’t know if I will, either. But being here... it seems so surreal. Like it all happened in a weird, sinister dream. I’ve been away three weeks — but here it’s been a day. Tomorrow is Friday. I’ve school. Noone’s probably even noticed that I’ve been away... how the hell is that possible?”

“Hikari-chan?”

A soft knock at the door startled her and she turned her head towards it as she recognised her mother’s voice.

“Can I come in?” Miaka asked gently, and Hikari sighed, closing her eyes again.

“I guess.” She replied at length, and the door slipped open, revealing the woman Hikari had known her whole life. And yet, as she gazed at her mother’s face, for the first time Hikari found herself seeing something of the stranger in Miaka’s gentle, amiable features.

“Hikari-chan...” Miaka shut the door behind her, coming to sit down on the bed as she reached across to pull her daughter gently into a sitting position. “I know you must be tired and you’ll probably want to sleep. But I... I wanted to see if you were hungry at all.”

“I’m not.” Hikari shook her head. “I don’t think I can eat, right now.”

“All right.” Miaka hesitated, then, “I also hoped I could talk to you a little, before you go to bed.”

“I... okay.” Hikari leant up against her mother, suddenly glad of the woman’s warm presence. Stranger or not, she was someone unconnected to the dark events in Sairou, and Hikari found that something of a relief.

“If you don’t want to go to school tomorrow, then you don’t have to.” Miaka said softly. “Your father and I are agreed — after all you’ve been through, if you don’t want to — we’ll understand.”

“I... no. It’s okay. I think.” Hikari sighed, rubbing her temples. “I want... to do something normal. I feel... so really strange. That’s the truth. Like I don’t belong here. Like I don’t really know you or Dad at all... like I’ve been thrust into a strange world again, except this time it’s this one. This world feels like the wrong one.”

“It’s confusing, when you come back to such a time disparity.” Miaka agreed. “Your father said you spent three weeks or so in the Shijin-Tenchishou — it’s hard to equate with the fact only a day has passed here, isn’t it?”

She smiled.

“The first time I came back from the Shijin-Tenchishou, I spent only a few hours here.” She added. “But by the time I got back there, three whole months had gone by.”

“Three whole...” Hikari trailed off, and Miaka nodded.

“Yes.” She agreed. “On another occasion, Taka and I returned to this world for about a day, and when we went back there, it had been a week. It’s disorientating.”

“Chichiri did say... something about it.” Hikari admitted. “I guess now I see what he meant.”

“Chichiri has taken good care of you, I trust?”

“Yes...” Hikari faltered, nodding her head. “He... he and his family have been really kind to me, Mum. They’ve treated me like... I’m one

of them. I feel like I've let them down so badly right now, to tell you the truth. I... don't understand anything except the fact that something terrible's happened because of me, and I can't... I don't know what to do to fix it."

"I see." Miaka spoke thoughtfully. "Can you tell me what the terrible thing is, Hikari-chan?"

Hikari sighed, biting her lip.

"I don't know." She admitted. "I don't know if... I can talk about it. It... it's something... bad, Mum. Something worse... than taking Uncle Keisuke's money. Much... much... worse than that."

"It's all right. I promise not to be angry, whatever it is." Miaka shook her head. "I've come here to listen, not to scold. I'm glad to have you home, but something's on your mind... and I wanted to help you clear it up."

She smiled, holding her daughter at arm's length.

"You don't talk to me much any more." She added. "You haven't really since you began middle school. I miss it... I know you're growing up, but... that doesn't mean you can outgrow your family, you know."

"I... I guess I know that." Hikari looked startled, then she returned the smile with a faint one of her own. "I really missed you, in that world, Mum. You and Dad. Seeing Chichiri and his family, and Shishi... everything made me kinda homesick."

"You'll have to tell me all about those things, later." Miaka reflected. "But right now, I want to know what's troubling you so much, Hikari-chan. Please. Tell me."

Hikari closed her eyes, tears welling up in her hazel eyes once more. Slowly and painfully she related the events in Kitora's shrine, and until she had finished, Miaka remained silent, slipping a gentle arm around her daughter's shoulders.

"And you feel it's your fault?" She asked softly, when Hikari found she had run out of words, and Hikari nodded.

"It was." She whispered. "Because... it was me he was protecting. That's why. And Shishi... Shishi will never forgive me for it. Nor Tasuki, or Anzu-san. He was... Jin was their... like their son. Like Shishi's brother. And... I... I..."

She trailed off, and Miaka hugged her tightly, running her fingers through the still-wet dark hair.

“Shall I tell you something true?” She murmured, and Hikari raised surprised eyes to her mother’s.

“Sure.” She agreed. “What is it?”

“When Nuriko died, I felt exactly the same way as you’re feeling now.” Miaka pursed her lips. “I was so... I took so much for granted up until then. Terrible things had happened, true enough — but when Nuriko died, I really felt... like I wanted to run away. Give up on everything and hide. Go home. Let it all slide. That someone had to die for us to gain the Shinzahu, and raise Suzaku... I was too slow to realise that so much was at stake. But when he died... I very nearly gave up being Suzaku no Miko.”

“Really?” Hikari looked startled. Miaka nodded solemnly.

“Really.” She agreed. “Nuriko and I were very close... he was like a big sister figure in a lot of ways. He was so much like a girl and I related to that in him — I came to rely on him and confide in him a whole lot, especially where your father was concerned. And then... in one flash... he was gone. One stupid fight... and I lost him.”

Hikari frowned, turning this over in her mind.

“So what did you do?” She whispered. “Chichiri and Tasuki talk about you as the Priestess — their friend, but Kounan’s saviour. What changed?”

“Tamahome and Mitsukake both spoke to me.” Miaka remembered. ‘In truth, I think it was Mitsukake who broke through and made me truly see that Nuriko had made the choice he’d had to make — had followed his destiny in order to take us the next step forward. That to summon Suzaku, there might be sacrifices, and that... that it would hurt, when there were. But so long as we kept going, it was all right to let it hurt. And for Nuriko’s sake... we had to keep going. Every time something challenged me, I’d remember Nuriko’s last words to me. He said, “*no matter what, don’t lose.*” And I tried very hard to do as he asked me. Even when we lost Chiriko, or when Mitsukake or Hotohori passed away... I tried to hold onto those words. That this... what we were doing... was about Kounan. About lots of people who needed me. Not just... not just a few people. And so, no matter how much it hurt when they died... I kept going.”

Hikari digested this slowly. Then she sighed.

“But you were Suzaku no Miko.” She said helplessly. “Taiitsukun said that I couldn’t be that. Or at least, she didn’t think I’d ever be strong enough. She said that Kounan didn’t need me to be that... that

you were the only true Priestess Kounan had ever had and I wasn't you."

"No, you're not me." Miaka shook her head. "But you are my Shinzahou, Hikari-chan. And I wish very much that I'd never done that — that I'd never wished so much onto your shoulders. But even so, there's nothing I can do now to change that. And even though as your mother, I regret it — I... I don't think I made a mistake. I think you're stronger than you think you are."

"I don't." Hikari shook her head. "I ran away. I didn't even mean to — I just wound up back here. But Jin is still dead. I can't do anything to fix that, can I? And so long as that's true... I don't know if I can ever feel better. He... he told me he was in love with me, Mum. I... I don't even know how I felt about him, or any of that. But he told me that, and then... then he died for me... and I can't bear that. That someone would throw their life away over me."

"Are you really so useless as all that?" Miaka asked softly. "When Chichiri spoke to your father — he said you were a good girl and that we should be proud of you. Do you think he'd have said that if he didn't mean it? Chichiri has seen something in you that you can't see in yourself, Hikari-chan. Something maybe we didn't even realise was within you, until now. You just need to believe in yourself."

"You think I should go back, don't you?" Hikari faltered, and Miaka shrugged.

"Not necessarily. Not if you don't want to." She replied. "If your father knew that we were even discussing the possibility, I think he'd freak out, to be quite honest. As your mother, I want you as far away from danger as possible. Hearing you talk about the death of a friend frightens me — I know better than anyone the dangers of being a stranger in that world. But... as Suzaku no Miko..."

She smiled resignedly.

"I'm tied to Kounan. Its fate is always something that involves me." She admitted. "That's why, when I was first expecting you, you became my Shinzahou. Kounan needed salvation, and I could no longer go back there myself. So I sent you — with your aunt Mayo — to do the job for me. I don't even know how I did it — Suzaku's connection to me works in mysterious ways. This time, he called *you*. Because you are who you are... Suzaku no Shinzahou. For better or worse."

Hikari took a deep, shuddering breath into her lungs.

“Right now everything seems surreal.” She murmured. “And even if I did want to go back — which right now, I don’t — I don’t know how. I promised that guy I wouldn’t go back to the library — or at least, I said I’d keep away from that room. So I can’t go back to the book that way. Besides, when I took it off the shelf, it felt strange. Like it didn’t want me to go back that way.”

“Or maybe your own feelings stopped you.” Miaka suggested. “Musume-chan, I’m more glad than you know to have you back here. You and Makoto are the most important things that your father and I have, and if we’ve never made you realise that, then I’m sorry for it.”

“I don’t know if it’s that.” Hikari reflected. “I just... sometimes it seems like you don’t mind if I do well or if I don’t. Like you don’t understand everything about being a teenager. But... being in that world... I guess I began to understand some things that I didn’t before, too. I’m sorry about what I did and said before I left. I was really worried I’d not get to tell you that.”

“It’s all right. It’s forgiven and put down as temporary insanity.” Miaka assured her.

Her gaze strayed across the room to the chair by the door, and she frowned, surprise glittering in her expression as she took in the sword propped up against it.

“Hikari-chan, is that... Hotohori’s...”

“Yes.” Hikari flushed. “I didn’t mean to bring it back here, but it kinda came too. Reizeitei-sama gave it to me, to take to Sairou.”

“Reizeitei...?”

“Hotohori-sama’s son.”

“Boushin.” Miaka’s expression cleared. “Of course — he must be a young man now. Even if you did cross back over time, he must be quite grown. And I’m sure, as handsome as his father was, too.”

“Yeah, I guess so.” Hikari nodded her head. “I mean, he is handsome. And Boushin — Chichiri calls him that sometimes, when he’s not thinking about it. But Reizeitei-sama’s... an Emperor. So... you know. I don’t.”

“He was a very sweet baby boy.” Miaka remembered. “It seems strange, that he’d be old enough to govern in his own right now. I can only picture the big-eyed little boy clutching the teddybear I left with his father when we first sailed for Hokkan.”

“You miss the people in that world, don’t you?” Hikari realised

with a jolt, staring at her mother in surprise, and Miaka nodded.

“Very much.” She admitted. “Very much indeed.”

“Even though it was dangerous, and people died?”

“Yes.” Miaka agreed. “It’s hard, sometimes, when some of your closest friends are somewhere you can never go again. Chichiri and Tasuki are the only Seishi living in that world any more — but I haven’t seen them since long before you were born. Even your father has — but I can’t go back to the Shijin-Tenchishou now I’m a mother in my own right. I’ve finished my duty as Suzaku no Miko — I can’t cross the divide.”

She sighed, resting her hands on her daughter’s shoulders.

“But it sounds like both of them are well, and happy.” She added. “And that they have families of their own, in that world.”

“Yes.” Hikari agreed. “Chichiri and his wife Aidou live in a village near Reikaku-zan and they have two children — Eiju is Makoto’s age and Meikyo is eight. They... they’ve been like my surrogate family. And Tasuki — Tasuki has Anzu-san, and Shishi... and Jin, but...”

She faltered, biting her lip.

“Not any more.” She added softly.

She sighed, glancing at her hands.

“I stayed there originally because I didn’t want anything to happen to Chichiri’s children.” She admitted. “But now, instead, I feel like... I’ve caused Tasuki to lose the person he considers his son, instead. And that’s no good either.”

“I’m sure it’s not as clear cut as you think, and I can’t imagine that Tasuki holds you responsible.” Miaka said gently. “I know him and how he is — I’m sure he doesn’t blame you at all. From what you said, anyway, it sounds like Jin made the same choice Nuriko made, all those years ago. To put the lives of everyone in Kounan before his own. That makes him a special person, Hikari-chan — but it doesn’t make you his killer.”

“I guess... maybe.” Hikari murmured. “So... you do think I should go back.”

“That isn’t a decision I’m going to make for you.” Miaka shook her head. “I won’t tell you to go — as I said, as your mother, I’m glad you’re here and safe and sound. That makes me happy... and relieved. But if you do decide to go — I’m sure I’ll understand your reasons.

And so long as you come back safely once everything is resolved — I won't be cross."

She smiled, and Hikari saw a flicker of her mother's usual happy-go-lucky nature in the hazel eyes.

"It's late, and you should get some rest." She added. "If you want to go to school tomorrow, Hikari, you need to get a good night's sleep. Otherwise you'll be following my example and falling asleep in your classes."

"I... I may have done that once or twice before." Hikari admitted reluctantly, and Miaka grinned.

"Well, people do say you are like me." She reflected. "Oh well. I suppose... that's just to be expected."

She tilted her head, eying her keenly.

"Your father and I don't expect you to ace every test, or save every world from destruction." She said softly. "We only expect you to do what makes you happy. That's all. It's not that we don't care what you do — or how well you do. So long as you're happy, Hikari — that's the only thing that matters. School is important — but so are other things. Remember that, okay?"

She touched her daughter gently on the cheek, wiping away the last of the tears as she got to her feet.

"Think about it carefully." She added. "I'm sure Hotohori will watch over you, while you do. And sleep safely, musume-chan. If you like, we'll talk more tomorrow... but for now, get some rest. Things may seem clearer in the morning, after all."

Chapter 17

Chapter Sixteen

“It will feel good to be finally going home.”

Aoiketsu glanced at his reflection briefly in the mirror as he pulled his long dark hair into its usual warrior's queue, frowning as he cast his friend a glance. “Maichu, are you getting up this morning? Hyoushin-sama said he wanted to leave Hengei as early as possible. We've a full day's ride before we get to Kaidou.”

“That's all very well for you to say.” Maichu grimaced, sitting down on his bed as he pulled on his riding boots. “You don't mind getting on that death trap. Me, I've absolutely no wish to go anywhere near Kaidou or the damn boat any time soon. Once in a lifetime is enough for this soldier — trust me. I'm not built to float and that's that!”

Aoiketsu laughed, shaking his head in amusement as he surveyed his friend. It was early the next morning, and somehow, with the fresh light of day he felt bright and optimistic about the journey to come. Despite the dangers, after all, they had retrieved the treasures they had set out for, and soon would be setting foot once more on Eastern soil.

“You're such a wimp. It's only seven days, if that... and Suiko controls the waves so there's no danger.” He said now. “I heard you last night, begging Hyoushin-sama to take us through the mountain path to Kounan and back home that way. You make such a fuss.”

“You shut your face, Mr ‘I Puked On The Mountain.’ Maichu picked up his sword, jabbing it warningly in his companion's direction before slipping it into its scabbard.” You weren't so smug when Miramu came out of the cave bleeding, now were you? Kayu told me you heaved your guts up good and proper... I can't believe you did that in front of that assassin, of all people! God knows what he thinks Kutou's soldiers are made of now!”

“He probably saw.” Aoiketsu said smartly. “Besides, probably thanks to *your* big mouth, he already knew that I was squeamish. And at least, when I am, it's only for brief periods. Not a full seven day stretch — you're far worse than me.”

He reached across to cuff his friend lightly across the back of the head.

“Get a move on, you ape, else we won’t get any breakfast and I hate riding on an empty stomach.”

“Okay, okay. I’m ready.” Maichu grumbled, dragging his own wavy hair into a loose tail as he got to his feet. “Yeesh, you are in a hurry to get off.”

“I want to go home, I suppose.” Aoiketsu reflected. “It’s always weird, being away from Kutou. And let’s face it, Hokkan and Sairou aren’t the nicest holiday destinations in the world.”

“Tell me about it.” Maichu acknowledged ruefully. “Snow enough to freeze anyone’s hide or dust dry enough to rot your eyes. In comparison, the civil war seems fairly minor. I swear more people probably die in these so called peaceful places from the ugly climatic issues. Either that, or they’re made of steel or somethin’ like it. I swear, I don’t understand how folk can even live in a place as dry an’ barren as Sairou. On balance, I think I even prefer Hokkan. At least if you melt the snow, there’s water.”

“True enough.” Aoiketsu reflected. “Which is why the sooner we get moving, the better.”

“Are you guys actually getting up this morning?” At that moment, the door was flung open to reveal Kayu, his dark eyes bright with excitement as he gazed from one young man to the other impatiently. “You’re the last — Hyoushin-sama sent me to get you. He wants to talk to you — and me -about something, before we leave. And he’s getting pretty pissed at how long you’re taking, too!”

“The Commander doesn’t get pissed.” Maichu said frankly. “And you could learn to knock, Kayu. I might’ve been indecent.”

“You spend most your life bein’ indecent, but with Aoi as a roommate, I figured it was pretty safe.” Was Kayu’s response. “Even you wouldn’t be so brazen as to slip a tavern whore in here under his nose.”

“Damn right he wouldn’t.” Aoiketsu said darkly, and Maichu snorted.

“None of the women in Sairou are that attractive, anyway.” He reflected. “The only one even vaguely pretty was that Toroki dame — and she was a scary-ass witch.”

“Too true.” Kayu shivered, shaking his head. “But the Commander said we weren’t to dwell on her. Come on, will you? He mightn’t be yelling or stamping his feet, but it doesn’t mean he ain’t fed up... he’s starting to get that look in his eyes.”

“Do you think we’re in trouble?” Aoiketsu asked hesitantly, as the three men hurried down the main stairs towards the solar where their Commander was awaiting them alone, the rest of the party being engaged with breakfast. Kayu shrugged his shoulders.

“No idea, but I got the feeling he wasn’t one hundred percent keen on whatever it was.” He said. “I think he reported back to the Emperor last night — probably. Maybe it’s orders from him... direct from headquarters.”

“Maybe.” Maichu pursed his lips. “Though I can’t imagine that’d piss Hyoushin-sama off. He doesn’t ever seem too worried by things the Emperor tells him to do.”

“Well, maybe not.” Kayu admitted. “But even so...”

He shrugged.

“You see for yourself.” He said eventually, as they reached the door of the solar. He raised his hand, knocking sharply on the door, and at the commander’s call, he swung it open, leading his companions inside.

As they crossed the threshold, Hyoushin turned from where he had been gazing out of the window, eying each man in turn. He pursed his lips.

“It seems that you require more time than your companions to dress in the morning.” He murmured softly, and although there was no active reproach in his tones, the flicker in his amethyst eyes conveyed his disapproval. “You aren’t usually so slow back home in Kutou — I trust this is a temporary state of affairs?”

“It’s my fault, sir. I was slow getting up — Aoi was chivvying me.” Maichu said honestly. “To be truthful, the thought of getting on that boat again... I guess it made me sleep in, or somethin’.”

“Ah yes. The boat.” Hyoushin’s expression became thoughtful. Then he smiled slightly, nodding his head. “Then my news will be pleasant for you at the very least, Maichu.”

“News, sir?” Aoiketsu looked startled. “Has something happened?”

“No, not yet.” Hyoushin shook his head. “It is more that I have a specific mission for you three to carry out. Particularly you, Aoiketsu.”

“Me?” Aoiketsu frowned. “What kind of a mission, Commander?”

“I will come to that in just a moment.” Hyoushin’s gaze flitted between Kayu and Maichu, then he nodded his head.

“The pair of you will not be accompanying us back to Kaidou today.” He said softly, and Kayu’s eyes opened wide with dismay.

“Not...” He faltered. “But why...?”

“We’re not getting on that damn boat?” Maichu demanded. “Are you serious, sir? You’re really not making me go through that again?”

“I have another task in mind.” Hyoushin shook his head. “Kayu, do not look so distressed. You are in no trouble — on the contrary, this is a mission with the Emperor’s direct blessing. I have asked his permission to deploy you three in this manner, and he has accepted your trustworthiness and suitability for the task. Therefore you should take pride — your King has faith in you.”

“The Emperor.” Aoiketsu murmured, and Hyoushin nodded.

“Indeed.” He agreed. “And it is a mission of some delicacy. It involves entering enemy territory, and there is some personal risk in doing so. You are all three going to cross the border into the southern lands — Aoiketsu, you will leave immediately. Kayu and Maichu, you will remain here in Hengei a further day, and then track across the border yourselves. If possible I want you to avoid the toll path that leads to the bandit mountains of Reikaku-zan and Kaou-zan.”

“We’re going to *Kounan*?” Kayu’s eyes almost fell out of his head. “For real?”

“Yes, you are.” Hyoushin confirmed. “But I am relying on your discretion. Your presence there must not be unearthed — you are travelling undercover, and as such, your true identities as soldiers of Kutou’s army must not be discovered. It is not so long since we were in a war situation with Kounan, and now their Emperor is of age, we do not wish to antagonise him into avenging the death of his father. After all, Lord Saihitei is said to have martyred himself for Kounan on the battlefield against Kutou’s Shougun and his army. Such a memory is not one we wish to stir.”

“So we’re going as spies?” Excitement glittered in Maichu’s eyes, and despite himself, Hyoushin’s lips twitched into another faint smile.

“To be strictly accurate, Aoiketsu will be the only true spy.” He reflected. “Maichu, you and Kayu will be his point of contact. I wish you to station yourselves in convenient positions — you will cross into Kounan together, but once there, Maichu will head to Eiyuu, and Kayu, I think it best you travel to the town known as Kahou. You will receive Aoiketsu’s reports and convey them back to Kutou. I wish you to carry this task out in person — which is why I am deploying two of

you. You will meet, compare notes and then one of you will travel East to pass the information on to us. The other will remain in position to gather more information. I will be trusting both of you to adjudge the situation as best you can in terms of your own security and of course, Aoiketsu's. He will, after all, be taking the most risks."

"I'm... to be... a spy?" Aoiketsu asked faintly, and Hyoushin met his gaze with an even one of his own.

"Yes." He agreed. "And shortly I will discuss with you a little further what it is I want from you. Maichu, Kayu, before we depart this place, I will make sure you both have maps of the area you will be going. It will be up to you to make contact with Aoiketsu through whatever means available, without generating suspicion — do you understand the mission I have assigned you?"

"So long as I don't have to get on a boat, I'll do anything." Maichu said fervently. "It's understood, sir."

"Kayu?"

"Yes, Commander." Kayu nodded his head. "I understand — I'm to go to Kahou and receive information."

"You and Maichu will be able to discuss your own rendezvous procedure on your ride south tomorrow." Hyoushin agreed. "I wish to get Aoiketsu into Kounan before you two are mobilised, so you will have time to plan before you leave. I am placing great faith in you both — and the skills you possess. So is the Emperor. We believe you both creative and capable enough to carry out this task without complication... do not let us down."

"Yes, sir." As one, the two young soldiers saluted, and Hyoushin inclined his head in acknowledgement of their gesture.

"Then you are dismissed." He said softly, and after exchanging looks, the two men withdrew from the solar, leaving Hyoushin alone with the dazed Aoiketsu.

For a moment there was silence, then,

"You want me to go south and spy on the people in Kounan, sir?" Aoiketsu found his voice, eying his Commander in some confusion. "Has something happened — is this to do with what Miramu said the other night?"

"Somewhat." Hyoushin nodded. "The truth is, Aoiketsu, Kounan are always an unknown quality. All we do know, truly, is that somehow they have had insider information we have not had. Certainly they

knew the location of Seiryuu's Shinzahou before we did, and it seems they were also aware of Byakko's, too. More than that, they have enlisted the help of Byakko's guardian Seishi Toroki — what their appeal is, I do not know. But it has been agreed that before we venture south in search of Suzaku's own treasure, we must fully know our opposition."

"I see." Aoiketsu's expression became grave. "And that's where I come in?"

"Yes." Hyoushin agreed. "After discussion, the Emperor and I feel you are the best choice for this role."

"I don't understand why, sir." Aoiketsu admitted. "I mean, I know I'm a good fighter — but I'm useless in a battle situation. We both know that."

"If you would strengthen your will, Aoiketsu, I am sure you would find you had a genetic predisposition to combat skill." Hyoushin said cryptically, and Aoiketsu frowned.

"You say that," He began. "But..."

"I wish you to go there under a different premise, however." Hyoushin interrupted, before Aoiketsu could ask the fateful question. "I wish to make use of your other attributes."

"My other...?"

"Your identity as Kaiga Aoiketsu." Hyoushin smiled faintly. "The orphaned son of a destroyed noble family. I have complete trust in you, Aoiketsu. So does the Emperor. Your loyalty to Kutou has never been in doubt — which is another good reason we are sending you, even though there are significant risks should you be discovered. We do not consider our enemies to be fools — for this reason, your cover must be as convincing as possible. And so we have decided to send you into this situation as your own self — with a few modified details to better suit the situation."

He gestured to Aoiketsu's right hand.

"You have always worn that ring, since your finger was big enough to bear it." He added. "It was your mother's keepsake to you, which is your reasoning, I know. But it once belonged to Kaiga Gin as head of the Kaiga family. It is genuine, and will suggest to anyone who sees it that you are indeed a surviving son of that massacred family. I wish you to play on this — to pass yourself off as a hunted exile and the enemy of the Emperor and his army because of your blood connections. You have been well educated, and have good court

manners when you choose to use them, on account of your unusual childhood situation. You are familiar with the geography of the four lands, and you have always had a quick memory for details and directions. Your fighting skill will only become a necessity if you are threatened — and I do not feel that is likely so long as you stick to the facts you already know about the Kaiga family and estate.”

Aoiketsu’s brows knitted together, as he absently fingered the ring on his middle finger.

“You talk about them as if I’m pretending to be Kaiga Aoiketsu now.” He murmured. “Which is the truth, Commander? Am I him, or am I not?”

“For the purpose of this exercise, that speculation is unnecessary.” Hyoushin said pragmatically. “From this moment on, you are as I have just told you. Repeat it to me, please. I wish to know you have understood.”

Aoiketsu sighed, but nodded his head.

“I’m the orphaned son of the Kaiga family, whose estate was destroyed by Kintsusei-sama and the Shougun’s army during the war with Kounan.” He said slowly. “And I’m in exile because I’m the surviving heir to the land — and so people want me dead.”

“Correct.” Hyoushin agreed approvingly. “Good.”

“And I’m going to be seeking shelter in Kounan?”

“Well, there is a slightly unpleasant part of this task, too.” Hyoushin admitted. “I am sending you south with Miramu as escort — he already knows the detail of this mission, and will accompany you as far as Reikaku-zan’s surrounding territory.”

“Miramu?” Aoiketsu stared. “Why, sir? I thought you didn’t trust him?”

“I don’t, but I trust you — and your skill to evade harm.” Hyoushin said softly. “Besides, Kounan have allied themselves with Toroki. She told me herself that she is able to detect Miramu’s presence. This, I feel, is a useful thing to know and to take advantage of.”

“I don’t understand.” Aoiketsu looked confused. “Why would it be at all good for them to know I was in Miramu’s company?”

“Because as an exile, I imagine you might be hunted by assassins.” Hyoushin said evenly. “Particularly those who are already in the pay of Kutou’s crown.”

Aoiketsu's eyes narrowed as he absorbed this, and slowly he nodded his head.

"I follow." He murmured. "Miramu's the final piece of evidence that my life is in danger. The reason I've fled south is to escape from him."

"Yes." Hyoushin confirmed.

"And while I'm there — what is it exactly you want me to discover?"

"You have no complaints, then, with the mission I am assigning you?"

"No, sir. If it's the Emperor's will, and a direct order, I'll do it." Aoiketsu shrugged his shoulders. "If it will help Kutou's cause, you know I'll do what I have to. Even if it's unusual."

"That's what I hoped you'd say." Hyoushin reflected. "Very well. As for the information — any information you can discover on the whereabouts of Kounan's treasures — the Shinzahou and the relic — these are of great importance. Also, though, I wish you to discover whatever you can about the Suzaku Shichi Seishi. And... and the girl that aligns herself with them... the one they call Hikari."

"Hikari." Aoiketsu repeated thoughtfully. "That's the girl Miramu was mentioning, wasn't it?"

"Yes." Hyoushin inclined his head. "Whatever it is he isn't telling us — or whatever he doesn't know — I would like to. I feel sure I can trust you to relay this information to me."

"I will do my best." Aoiketsu promised.

"Then go with Miramu and infiltrate Suzaku's people as best you can." Hyoushin instructed. "As you heard, Kayu and Maichu will be in situ within a day or two, and I will instruct them to make themselves known to you by some means when they are. Your method of relaying information will be your own devising — your secret must be well protected, if you are to succeed and to evade capture."

"Yes, sir." Aoiketsu nodded, raising his hand in a salute. "I understand."

"Then you should eat, and prepare to leave." Hyoushin told him, and Aoiketsu almost thought he saw a faint flicker of regret in the Commander's eyes. He frowned.

"Sir, is it all right that I go?" He asked hesitantly, and the Meihi

nodded.

“It is the Emperor’s will, and my decision.” He agreed. “We will be relying on you — before we can enter Kounan, we will need much more information than we have know. They are not an enemy to be taken lightly... as our history has proven.”

“Well, I’ll find out what I can.” Aoiketsu said resolutely. “About the treasures *and* the girl, sir — you and the Emperor can both count on me!”

So this was how it was.

Tasuki stood on the mountain ledge, leaning up against the trunk of a sturdy tree as he cast his gaze across the landscape that sprawled below them. From his vantage point, he could clearly see both Souun and the five villages that dotted around the foot of Reikaku-zan’s great lupine expanse, and as he glanced at them, he sighed, realising he wasn’t watching over them as Genrou of the mountain, but rather Tasuki of the Suzaku Shichi Seishi.

“We will protect Kounan, Jin.” He murmured, turning away from the view as he paced the stony, uneven pathway back towards his original destination. True to Toroki’s words, the carriage train bearing Jin’s remains had arrived the previous evening and, mindful of the heat and the distress the situation had caused, Tasuki had decreed that he be buried right away on the slopes of the mountain he had loved so much. Stone from the mountain had already been heaved free by that time, with half a dozen strong bandits working on it tirelessly to fashion a basic coffin, and consequently a rough-edged stone casket stood in a woody clearing, steadied at its base by several larger rocks. In time, Tasuki knew, the grave would be covered in the same way as Hakurou’s and Reirei’s, to protect it from the elements. But such projects took time, and although men would begin on it that morning, somehow the whole endeavour felt hollow.

Slowly he set his hand down atop the stone lid.

“I ain’t mad at you, kid.” He murmured. “An’ we will avenge this. I promise we will. We’ll bring Hikari back to Reikaku-zan, any way we can. An’ Shishi — I promise, you ain’t gotta worry about Shishi.”

He frowned, closing his eyes as now, in the solitude of the early morning he finally let his own tears fall. As Kashira, he had somehow found the will to remain strong during the previous day’s events, but now, with the task completed, there was no longer anything to distract him, and he clenched his fists, allowing the tears to run freely

down his cheeks.

All too clearly in his mind he remembered the first day he and Kouji had met the young boy, scavenging and stealing on the streets of Souun, and even then, despite his rough manners and obstinacy, Tasuki had seen real bandit potential in the waif and stray. When the six year old Jin had taken them back to the dishevelled shelter in which he had been staying, both Tasuki and Kouji had been struck by the barren nature of the building, and more, by the still, sleeping corpse of the boy's mother laying motionless in her bed. Kouji had immediately suggested bringing Jin to the mountain, clearly remembering his own family's death, and Tasuki had been quick to agree, giving a coin to the neighbouring tenants to see to the unfortunate woman's burial.

"You were determined to defend her, even though she beat you and cursed your existence." Tasuki murmured, running his fingers along the top of the casket. "An' I promised her, too, that we'd see you all right. Guess I ain't so good at keeping promises as I thought I was. I hate that. I hate it. I hate seein' Anzu cry. I hate seein' Shishi cry, too. But I... I don't blame you for it, Jin. After all, I taught you well. An' you were... only carryin' out my orders. Protect them, I told you... what the hell else would you do, but obey me?"

"It's not your fault either, you know."

A soft voice from the greenery startled him and he swung around, seeing Chichiri standing watching him. His brows drew together as he registered the sorcerer's *shakujou* clutched between his fingers, his *kesa* slung over his shoulders and his *kasa* on his head.

"What are you doing here?" He murmured, and Chichiri's gaze softened.

"I thought we'd go to Taiitsukun." He said quietly. "And ask her to explain everything we don't already know."

Tasuki was silent for a moment, then,

"Whatever the hell she says, she ain't gonna bring him back." He said flatly. "I won't forgive her for that."

Chichiri sighed, resting a hand on his friend's shoulder.

"I came for another reason, too." He admitted. "I knew... yesterday, you had to stay firm for Anzu and Shishi, and for the other bandits. If they'd seen you lose your composure and break down, it'd have caused panic. But I knew you'd have to let it out sometime. And I was worried about you. That's all."

“Heh.” Tasuki snorted, shaking his head. “I’m all right, Chichiri. Life goes on, doesn’t it? I should be used to this by now.”

“You never get used to burying the ones you love.” Chichiri said seriously. “I do understand that, you know. I’ve been there many times myself.”

“Yes, I know.” Tasuki admitted, raising his bronze gaze to meet the sorcerer’s ruby one. “I just... when we took him in... I never...”

“Jin made a choice.” Chichiri said softly. “Listen to me, Tasuki. Jin knew what he was doing. And even though he probably knew people would be upset by that choice, in the end he made the right one. His death is a tragedy for you and your people here on the mountain. But it also serves another function. If anything happened to Hikari, this world would be doomed. Everyone. Shishi. Anzu. The whole of the mountain. *Everyone*. I think, from what Shishi and Myoume both have said, that Jin weighed that up clearly in his mind before he made any decisions. And I’m sure he didn’t go into battle with Amefuri with the desire to die. More, I think he probably did it with the desire to make sure all those people he loved *didn’t* die. In the immediate sense, it was Hikari he was protecting. But by protecting her, he’s protecting everyone. Including the people who took him in when he had no one else to turn to.”

He offered the bandit a slight, grave smile.

“In his own way, I suppose, he’s repaying you for that.” He murmured softly. “So we have to keep going. For his sake. No matter how much it hurts.”

“I already decided that.” Tasuki nodded, reaching up to brush away the tears. “As Tasuki, I ain’t got any other choice. But Hikari still ain’t here, is she? Have you had any luck contacting her?”

“Not yet.” Chichiri shook his head, frustration glittering in his ruby eye. “I was hoping that Taiitsukun might help us with that, too.”

“If there’s anything left of her when I’m done.” Tasuki muttered. “Necessary sacrifice or not, Chichiri, I ain’t happy with it.”

“No one would expect you to be.” Chichiri said evenly. “You were as much his father as I am Eiju’s, after all. Even if it wasn’t a blood connection. I know what you’ve lost.”

He sighed, gazing up at the clear blue sky.

“I wonder how Shishi will be, this morning.” He murmured. “In some ways, it will hit her harder than it’s even done you or Anzu.

She's never really known the mountain without him, has she? I wonder if it's wise to keep her involved in any of this, when Hikari finally does come back."

"Anzu doesn't want her to be." Tasuki shook his head, as they turned away from Jin's grave, heading slowly back along the mountain path towards the bandit headquarters. "She's sort of accepted that it's not something I have any choice in, where my own involvement is concerned. But she says that Shishi's not a Seishi and that she can't lose her daughter within days of burying her son. Maybe she's right. Maybe it was reckless to send them in the first place."

"Myoume said that it was always going to be that way." Chichiri reflected.

"You've spent a lot of time talking with this Toroki girl, haven't you?" Tasuki shot him a sidelong glance, and Chichiri nodded.

"I wanted a full picture of what happened in Sairou." He agreed. "And she was fairly adamant that she had long since expected both Hikari and Shishi to come to her cave. The lion and the light, as she put it."

"Meaning what?"

"Well, Hikari isn't Suzaku no Miko — at least, right now, she's not." Chichiri frowned. "But she did come to this world to help save it. And because of that... I'm starting to feel like Shishi — and Jin, too — are like us in some ways where Hikari's safety is concerned. Hikari doesn't have Celestial Warriors she can call on, probably because she's not a true Miko. But even despite that, she still has acolytes... maybe even ones Suzaku chose. I've begun to wonder whether or not the reason Shishi and Hikari are drawn together is because of Shishi's Celestial blood after all."

Tasuki faltered, looking stricken.

"Because of me?"

"Yes." Chichiri agreed. "Even though they fought like hell to begin with, Tasuki... they've become very close very quickly. And don't forget, it was Shishi who originally found Hikari, when she first arrived in our world. I'd assumed it was us she was drawn to — but maybe I was wrong. Perhaps it was Shishi — in her own way, becoming a guardian of the Shinzahoo just like you were a guardian of the Miko."

"Shit, you ain't serious!"

“Perfectly.” Chichiri nodded. “For that matter, I’ve also noticed a bond beginning between Hikari and my own two children. It’s as if the connection has spanned across a generation. Hikari is Miaka’s daughter. Meikyo, Eiju and Shishi are Celestial children, just as she is. And Boushin, too — you didn’t hear him, but he gave Hikari Hotohori-sama’s *shinken*, and even expressed his regret at not being able to go to Sairou with them. Something in that girl draws out Suzaku’s legacy in the people she meets. I’m sure of it.”

“That doesn’t explain Jin.” Tasuki’s brow furrowed, and he slowly shook his head. “Jin was just a bandit. A damn fine one... but that’s all.”

“True.” Chichiri agreed. “But he’d aligned himself with you and with Shishi. For all you’d done for him — is it a stretch of the imagination to think he’d do whatever he could to repay you? He mightn’t have had Celestial blood, Tasuki — but he grew up in Suzaku’s shadow.”

“Shit.” Tasuki sighed. “Then this is even more messed up than I thought.”

“Well, it does seem that Suzaku works in mysterious ways.” Chichiri sighed. “There are a few things, though, that still bother me. Things Myoume has said and things I’ve come to realise on my own.”

“Such as?”

“When Myoume’s seen Hikari in her visions, she’s not seen her as the Pheonix’s embodiment. Just as light — pure and shining.” Chichiri responded. “As if her significance was something... we didn’t fully understand yet. Even though Suzaku’s power is sealed within her, she hasn’t fully embraced that role — that she’s not yet become fully Suzaku’s representative. And I wonder if that’s why Taiitsukun was so negative about her being Suzaku no Miko. Because right now she’s not there spiritually.”

“Okay... let me pretend I understood that.” Tasuki grimaced. “So because the kid can’t use her magic, she’s not able to do a damn thing to raise Suzaku? Right?”

“Something like that. At least, not right now.” Chichiri agreed. “And the other thing is that, in Sairou, she couldn’t sense the Shinzahou until she was right on top of it. Even then, she wasn’t sure where it was. But in Hokkan, she was drawn to Seiryuu’s. The difference was that you and I weren’t in the West Country... I wonder if that matters. Hikari said herself that she thought she had some kind of connection to us — to me in particular. What if her magic is not

strong enough to operate so far from Kounan?”

“Seems to me it’s strong enough, if it can send her back to her world.” Tasuki said frankly, and Chichiri sighed.

“Yes. That’s true.” He acknowledged. “Which is why I think it’s time to talk to Taiitsukun.”

“I’d like to come too, please, Chichiri.”

As they reached the bandit base, they found the young prophet watching them, apprehension in her indigo eyes as she took in the sober expressions on the faces of the two Suzaku warriors. “If you don’t mind. I’d like to come to Taikyoku-zan with you.”

“Myoume.” Chichiri looked startled, then, “Well, I don’t see why you shouldn’t. Tasuki... what do you think?”

“Whether she comes or not, it doesn’t make a difference to me.” Tasuki shook his head. “And however I feel, dammit, the priority now is to bring Hikari back to Kounan.”

“Then it’s decided. We’ll all go.” Chichiri nodded, bringing his fingers together before his face, his *shakujou* jingling in the sudden morning breeze. “I’ll try and be as smooth as possible..hold tight, the both of you.”

Tasuki clenched his fists tightly as the familiar whoosh of Chichiri’s spiritual magic engulfed him, whirling them into the *kasa* and through time and space. For a moment, they seemed suspended in nothingness. Then, as the familiar, glittering landscape of Taikyoku-zan became visible, he let out his breath in a rush, steadying himself as they landed.

“Not bad, considering.” Chichiri reflected. “Myoume, are you all right? I know this is a first time in my hat for you.”

“I’m fine.” Myoume assured him, gazing around her with wide eyes. “So this place... is Taikyoku-zan?”

“Yes.” Chichiri agreed. “I trained here for three years, before the coming of Suzaku no Miko. It’s one of the places I know to find best, you know.”

“I’ve seen it before.” Myoume murmured. “In my visions and dreams. But I didn’t know that this was where it was. So many things... slowly a lot of things are making more sense since I came to Kounan. I think it was definitely the right choice to make, to ally myself with Suzaku’s people.”

“Fine words, Toroki.”

A familiar voice echoed out of the surrounding landscape, causing all three Seishi to turn in surprise and Tasuki’s brows knitted as he rested his gaze on the enigmatic Emperor of the Heavens.

“I want a damn explanation from you.” He said coldly. “What the hell did you think you were doing, lettin’ Jin get sent somewhere for him to get killed? Dammit, why didn’t you tell us the half of it?”

“If I had, would you have still let him go?” Taiitsukun met the bandit’s gaze evenly, and Tasuki snorted.

“Damn it, of course not!” He exclaimed, and Taiitsukun sighed, shaking her head resignedly as her heavy jowls wobbled from side to side.

“Then the whole thing would have been futile, wouldn’t it?” She said softly. “I did not know that Jin would die. That there was a possibility of it — yes. That was why I urged Hikari to seek Toroki and follow her advice. Unfortunately, Jin seems to have decided against it. But in the end, the choice he made was not a bad one.”

“Meaning what, you stupid old bag?” Tasuki’s fingers stretched towards his tessens, as he bristled with fresh anger. “That was my son, dammit! My *son*! Do you understand that? Jin wasn’t just one of your goddamn pawns — he was my friggin’ *son*!”

“Tasuki...” Chichiri held up his hands, slowly shaking his head. “Don’t, you know? There’s nothing you can do to change it... not now.”

“Chichiri is right.” Taiitsukun agreed. “And as Tasuki of Suzaku, you should understand that sacrifices are a necessary part of life.”

“Yes. *My* life. *My* life, Taiitsukun. Not his.” Tasuki shook his head. “*I’m* Suzaku’s Seishi. I’ve got the mark. Jin was just a bandit. Nothing else. He wasn’t to do with this.”

Taiitsukun smiled slightly, eying him pensively.

“You should be prouder of him for that fact.” She said at length. “His death was unfortunate, but in the end, it prevented Hikari’s own. The destruction of Suzaku no Shinzahoo has far, far more wide reaching consequences than you realise. As Toroki has correctly told you, Sukunami Hikari is the only person who has any power to right this world. Without her active involvement, everything is doomed.”

She frowned, eying Myoume keenly.

“You have seen it, have you not?” She murmured. “The extinguishing of the stars, one by one? The death and destruction that will stalk the lands?”

“Yes.” Toroki nodded, a clouded look entering her indigo eyes. “I’ve seen it.”

“As I thought.” Taiitsukun frowned. “You bear Toroki’s spirit strongly, Geiyo Myoume. Even if your brother renounces his duty as Amefuri, you have taken yours seriously. And I’m glad to see it. You understand, I think, better than your Suzaku brethren just what’s at stake.”

“Extinguishing the stars.” Chichiri murmured. “Taiitsukun, do you mean... Kutou are going to... do the same thing to this world as what happened when Tamahome originally left it? His stars vanishing from the sky caused so much instability for Kounan. Are you saying...”

“That a dark power in the Eastern lands will choose to rip the constellations from the sky, and the Seishi’s spirits from the land below.” Taiitsukun nodded. “Yes. This is what I believe.”

“One of tribal birth.” Myoume whispered, and Tasuki shot her a confused glance.

“What the hell?” He demanded. “*Tribal* birth? What’s that mean? Our enemy is the Emperor of Kutou — ain’t it?”

“I don’t know.” Myoume admitted. “A lot of the things I see I don’t understand until they’re almost on top of me.”

“Such is the gamble of Toroki’s sight, child.” Taiitsukun told her gently. “You do well, considering your youth and isolation. But now you have made the right choice. Tasuki and Chichiri have much experience, and in this, your final aim is the same. Your own lives — these can be sacrificed for the sake of the lands you serve. But your spirits, as Celestial Warriors, underpin the survival of this world. Without them, the Shijin-Tenchishou cannot operate. There can be no life here, without the twenty eight stellar souls that make up the sky.”

“That’s a concept we’re familiar with.” Chichiri reflected. “So it’s pretty important we bring Hikari back here as soon as possible? Can we do that, Taiitsukun?”

“I’m sure you already know that the decision lies with the child herself.” Taiitsukun said simply. “Just as it ever has, Chichiri.”

“But we can reach her? Contact her?” Chichiri asked. “I’ve tried, using the timepiece Shishi had... but it’s not been possible so far.”

“You connected to the other world before to speak to Tamahome. Your brother in arms.” Taiitsukun said softly. “I suggest that you try the same technique when attempting to reach Hikari.”

“Meaning?” Tasuki demanded.

“Shishi.” Myoume breathed. “That’s it, isn’t it? When I first met them, I noticed the strong bond Jin, Shishi and Hikari had forged between them. It was the reason why I tried so hard to prevent that vision from coming true. Shishi might be able to reach her — is that what you mean, Taiitsukun?”

“You are as smart as your predecessor.” Taiitsukun bestowed the young woman with a smile. “Yes. Precisely that.”

“But Hikari’s connected to us as Suzaku Seishi — ain’t she?” Tasuki looked confused. Taiitsukun nodded

“Yes.” She agreed. “But she is not Suzaku no Miko. She is Suzaku no Shinzahoo, but she is not Kounan’s Miko. You must understand this, and understand it well.”

“And Shishi might be able to reach her where I can’t?” Chichiri looked thoughtful. “For spiritual reasons, Taiitsukun? Or simply because Hikari blames herself for Jin’s death, and Shishi’s the only one who might convince her it wasn’t her fault?”

“Above all things, Hikari is a human child.” Taiitsukun smiled. “And the word of a friend — of one who was there, one with whom she has forged a strong bond — will matter more than all the adult advice in the world.”

“Then Shishi is involved, isn’t she?” Tasuki sighed, and Taiitsukun nodded.

“Shishi must continue to support Hikari in her endeavours.” She agreed. “Whatever the cost.”

“And if I send my daughter into danger again, are you going to take her away from me too?” Tasuki demanded. “Or are you going to let Chichiri and I go too, the next time?”

“Your duty remains in Kounan.” Taiitsukun said unsympathetically. “As well you know.”

“It’s all right, Tasuki.” Myoume held up her hands. “Whatever they do, and wherever they go, I’ll go with them. I’m not tied anywhere, not at the moment. And I’m not just another person. I’m a Seishi and I have power I can use to protect them. Besides...”

She glanced at her gloved fingers, then,

“If Amefuri was to return, I’d know.” She added. “He can conceal himself from anyone and anything — such is his power. He can render himself invisible to the eyes and the senses both. But I... I can always see him. Because Toroki’s sight is so wide-ranging, I always know when he’s in the vicinity. And judging by his behaviour in Kitora’s shrine, he does not seek a confrontation with me just yet. This being so, I’m pretty sure he’ll keep his distance.”

“Then it’s decided.” Taiitsukun murmured. “If and when you manage to bring Hikari back from her world.”

With that she vanished, and Tasuki sighed, letting out a curse.

“Just as infuriating as ever.” He muttered. “Dammit, why is it so important for Shishi to be involved, anyway?”

“Because she and Hikari are friends.” Chichiri murmured. “And Hikari is, as Taiitsukun said, a fifteen year old girl. Some things are more important than just guardians, Tasuki. Taiitsukun is right. Hikari needs Shishi’s support because they’re of an age and they both understand what they’ve lost in Jin. Besides, I think Shishi needs Hikari too, at the moment. She’s on her own, with Jin gone. She’s never been given to making many friends, after all. Hikari is that... I think if we manage to bring them back together, it will be healing for both of them. And if Myoume is prepared to be their protector...”

“How strong are you, really?” Tasuki eyed the Byakko Seishi suspiciously, and Myoume shrugged, pulling her glove from her hands as she pressed her fingers together. She closed her eyes, then, as a white haze engulfed her form, she reached out her right hand, spreading the fingers as in the air before them, a faint haze of colour and light began to dance together to form pictures.

“What the...?” Tasuki faltered, staring in disbelief as the images became more vivid.

“This is the future of our world.” Myoume said softly, and Tasuki’s heart stilled in his chest as he registered the dead, barren land depicted before him. “For all people, rich and poor, old and young. Everywhere. This is my power, Tasuki. This is what I’ve seen since I was ten years old. And the thing I seek to prevent. Whatever it takes to do that is my goal. I will not hold back.”

She lowered her hand, and the images faded.

“What the hell was that?” Tasuki whispered.

“Toroki’s sight.” Myoume smiled. “I am not just a fortune-teller, Tasuki. I have other gifts as well. And I will use them to the fullest to protect your daughter. You have my word. In Jin’s absence, I will ensure no harm can come to her. I promise.”

“Then let’s go back to the mountain.” Chichiri suggested. “I want to talk to Shishi... and see if she can help to bring Hikari back into the Shijin-Tenchishou.”

Chapter 18

Chapter Seventeen

The sky over Tokyo was dotted with clouds as Hikari got slowly dressed for school, pausing to eye her alarm clock pensively as she pulled on her socks, reaching for her hairbrush to brush out her thick dark hair. For the first time since she had begun at her first school, she had not needed the reassuring chime of the alarm to wake her — in fact, she had barely slept at all, despite the fact she had been ready to drop.

Jin's sacrifice still haunted her thoughts, and try as she might, it was impossible to bring her mind back to the real world.

"While I was there, I wanted to be here." She murmured, sitting down in front of her mirror as she ran the brush methodically through the ebony waves, no real enthusiasm in her gesture. "And now I'm here, but I feel like... what do I feel? That I should be there? It's messed up. Because of me, Jin is dead. Because I'm stupid and useless. Why would I go back? What the hell use am I anyway, after that?"

She frowned, tossing her brush across the room in a fit of sudden pique, burying her head in her hands as she sought to gather her scattered composure.

"This is stupid." She muttered, running her fingers through her hair. "Get a grip, Hiki... else you'll never get through a day of school."

She got to her feet, pausing as she realised that she had used Shishi's affectionate name to address herself.

"Hiki." She murmured, biting her lip as her gaze fell on the *shinken*. "Dammit... I don't *like* feeling like this!"

"Hikari-chan? Arina's here!" Her mother's voice echoed through the apartment and she swallowed hard, settling herself as best she could.

"I'm almost ready!" She called back. "She can come in if she likes — I'm just doing my hair!"

She scooped up her schoolbag, and as she did so, her kanji dictionary tumbled out of the unzipped top, falling onto the floor with a thud. A frown crossing her face, Hikari bent to scoop it up, flicking idly through the pages.

As she reached a particular entry, she paused, fingering the page.

“Hikari.” She murmured. “Light. That’s what Myoume said... that I was light. That I was the difference. But Jin... did he die because I have to stay alive? I wish I knew what to do.”

“Braid it.”

A voice came from the doorway, startling her and she swung around, dropping the book in her surprise.

“Arina!”

“Well, who did you expect?” Arina lounged up against the doorpost. “What happened to you, Hi-chan? Wednesday night your Dad phones in a panic because he can’t find you, yesterday you skip school — and today your Ma’s all like normal — as if nothing was ever wrong. What gives?”

“Nothing. I wasn’t feeling well, but I’m fine now. And Dad didn’t know where I was because there was a misunderstanding. He didn’t know I’d gone to the library with... with Aunt Yui and Uncle Tetsuya.” Hikari said slowly, inwardly thanking her lucky stars that she had seen her adoptive aunt there that evening. “They had an Ancient Chinese display, and they wanted me to go.”

“Ancient China, huh? No wonder you were sick yesterday.” Arina pulled a graphic face. “Well, are we going? Much as I’d like to bunk off, we’ve a quiz second period and if you’re not sick, you’re not skipping. Not if I have to do it... and I can’t afford to miss another quiz this term.”

“I’m coming.” Hikari frowned, eying her reflection for a moment, and Arina snorted.

“I already told you. Braid it.” She said categorically. “It’s what you always do, after all — it’s not like it’s a major decision. Yeesh, Hikari — are you that desperate to get Haru-kun to notice you?”

“Haru-kun?” Hikari started, staring at her friend in confusion. “Why would you think that?”

“Only because you’ve been crushing on him for ages?” Arina retorted. “Where are you this morning, space cadet?”

“Ugh. Sorry.” Hikari rubbed her temples. “I really did *not* sleep well last night.”

“No kidding.” Arina grinned. “Oh, come here, you idiot. Let me do it.”

She grabbed up the discarded brush, pushing Hikari down onto her bed as she ran it through her friend's waves. "Got the ribbon? I swear if you got it cut you'd have less to do in the morning."

"I don't want to cut it." Hikari said absently. "I like my hair long."

"But it would suit you. And it'd get people to notice you." Arina said reflectively. "You keep complaining about that — and you look too sweet, this way. A new hairstyle might change all of that... you should think about it."

"I said I didn't want to, Ari. I'm happy with my hair like this."

"Well, you're the one who says you don't get noticed."

"Maybe there are more important things to me right now than how I look." As Arina tied the ribbon into the end of her friend's braid, Hikari stood, tossing the thick plait over her shoulder. "And I can do my own hair... you don't need to nanny me. We're not running late yet."

"Hey... don't bite my head off." Arina stared. "What is it, that time of the month? Because you're seriously in a mood this morning, Hichan. Did your Dad ground you over the library or something? Tell me you're still coming to the party!"

"I guess so." Hikari nodded slowly. "I'm not grounded. So yeah, I guess I'm coming."

"You guess?" Arina's brows knitted together. "What do you mean, you guess? How long have we been planning this?"

"Ari, I'm really not in the mood for this right now." Hikari said tiredly. "Can we just go already? We'll get the earlier bus, if you like."

"Are you sure you're feeling all right?" Arina demanded. "Because right now you aren't sounding like it. You're freaking me out, Hikari — even considering it is first thing in the morning."

"I'm fine."

"Yeah, right. Like hell you are." Arina frowned. "Did you miss the memo about confiding in your best friend, huh? You can tell me anything, you know — so start spilling already. Something's bugging you — did you talk to your Dad about the dress? Let me guess — he said no, and you took off to the library with your Aunt to get back at him — right?"

Hikari stared at her friend for a moment, and Arina grinned.

"Bingo." She murmured. "Damn, I didn't know you had it in you."

So did he waver? What happened?"

"Nothing." Hikari got a grip on herself, shaking her head. "Mum and Dad can't afford it. And I can't just take what isn't mine. So I guess it's tough."

"I already told you about that." Arina scolded. "It's only borrowing, if you intend to give it back after."

"No, it's not." Hikari shook her head, and Arina tut-tutted.

"You never get anywhere if you don't take risks." She pointed out. Hikari pursed her lips, raising serious hazel eyes to meet her friend's dark ones.

"It's stealing." She said softly. "And I don't want to do that. My family isn't like yours, Ari. Your Dad might not care. Mine would. All my family would. We don't do things like that. And I don't need a new dress just to go to a classmate's party. It's not that important."

Arina stared at her, dumbstruck by this sudden, serious rejection, and Hikari steeled herself for the comment she felt sure was coming. However, before Arina could find a retort, her gaze seemed to fix on something behind her friend and her eyes widened.

Hikari frowned.

"Ari?"

"Hikari, do you know that your alarm clock is kinda... well... glowing?" Arina murmured, raising a finger to point in the direction of the bedside cabinet.

"Glowing?" Hikari stared at her friend as if she was mad, but as she followed her friend's gaze, she saw that the other girl was right. There was a faint reddish aura glittering around the edges of her alarm clock, and she swallowed hard, darting across the room to scoop it up.

"I guess I forgot to turn it off properly." She murmured, grabbing it up off the unit. "That's all. Don't look so freaked."

Almost as soon as the words were out of her mouth, however, her fingers made contact with it and as they did, the light flared and glimmered more brightly, causing Arina to start in surprise, tripping over Hikari's discarded dictionary and falling back onto the girl's bed. She swore softly, her gaze not leaving the strange red haze that now engulfed Hikari's hands, and Hikari found she was scarcely any less stunned.

"What the..." She murmured.

“Hiki?”

At that moment, a voice seemed to crackle from somewhere inside the alarm clock, and at the sound of it, Hikari’s eyes almost fell out of her head.

“Sh... Shishi?”

*“Hiki, are you damn well listening to me? You better be! How dare you take off and abandon me! You got a lot of explaining to do, dammit — where the hell **are** you?”*

“Hikari, why is your alarm clock talking to you?” Arina asked unsteadily, and her face seemed suddenly lacking in colour. “And how does it know your name?”

“Shishi...” Hikari cast Arina a troubled glance, then, “I’m at home. That’s all. I came... I came home.”

“Dammit, I know that! I’m not stupid!” Came the snappish response. *“It was rhetorical!”*

“Look, Shishi, I... can’t... really... talk.” Hikari murmured slowly, as she registered her classmate’s growing incredulity. “Arina... is... here.”

“Arina?” The voice let out a snort. *“That idiot girl who got you in shit with your Dad? Forget her. This is more important — do you really think that Jin sacrificed everything so you could run home to Mama and Papa? If you do, you’re more of a wimp than I thought you were. Dammit, doesn’t Kounan mean a damn thing to you, even after everything we’ve all been through?”*

“It’s not that.” Hikari bit her lip. “Shishi... it was my fault. Because of me... and I didn’t mean to come back, it just happened.”

“It wasn’t your fault.” Shishi said frankly, though Hikari could hear the uneven note in her friend’s voice and she realised the girl’s anger was an act, thinly veiling her own grief.

“Listen, Hiki. Jin did it for you. No kidding that he did. But he did it for Kounan too. An’ if you ain’t here, it’s all been a waste. I won’t let that happen. I won’t let my damn brother die because you’re a chicken who can’t get her head straight. Understand me? You stop messin’ around with that airhead friend o’ yours an’ get yourself back here where you belong. This world needs you. That one don’t.”

“Hikari... what the hell is going on?” Arina whispered. “Your alarm clock is insulting me... or do you have a ghost in your room you haven’t told me about? Dammit, Hi-chan, if that’s a joke, it’s sure not

a funny one.”

“Shit, I can hear the bitch whining in the background.” Shishi remarked, and Hikari winced at her bandit friend’s bluntness. *“Look, I ain’t got time to argue it with you, Hiki. Chichiri’s goin’ all out to keep this spell goin’... So listen. An’ listen good. We’re back in the village. An’ I know you got Hotohori-sama’s shinken. Chichiri thinks if you take it an’ focus hard on comin’ back, you will. An’ dammit, Hiki, we need you.”*

There was a pause, then,

“Shit, I need you.” She added softly. *“I don’t like it on my own... Jin ain’t here, an’ I can’t bring him back. But you... dammit, if you don’t come back I’ll never forgive you!”*

With that the light around the clock flared and hissed as it faded, and Hikari sank down on her bed, staring at it as tears pricked at the back of her eyes.

“Shishi.” She murmured, setting the clock gingerly down. “She’s right. What am I doing? Jin said it himself, when he died... he said... that it was because Kounan needed me. And all I’ve done is hide and cry about it. If I stay here, it won’t mean a damn thing, what he did. For his sake... I have to go back. For his and for Shishi’s. We’re a team... for Kounan, I *have* to!”

“Hikari, what the hell is going on!”

At that moment she was startled out of her reverie by her friend who forcibly grabbed her by the shoulders, shaking her roughly as she met her gaze with confused, fearful dark eyes.

“What the hell just happened — what was that? What was that light? Who were you talking to? And why the hell did your alarm clock call me a bitch?”

Hikari swallowed hard, chewing on her lip as she realised Arina had overheard the whole exchange.

“If I told you, you’d never believe me.” She said softly, and Arina’s brows knitted together.

“So it’s okay, then, having secrets and... and weird stuff going on, and playing whatever tricks you’re playing on me?” She demanded. “Do you think it’s funny to freak me out and insult me, Hikari?”

“Shut up.” Hikari said impatiently, and Arina stared at her, struck speechless by the tone in her friend’s voice. “Listen. This is more important right now. If you’re mad at me, then you’ll have to be mad at me, but I can’t explain. There’s somewhere I need to be right now,

that's all. Somewhere other than school."

She grabbed her satchel up off her bed, tossing her schoolbooks out of it one by one, as Arina stared at her in disbelief.

"What do you mean, somewhere?" She demanded. "Hikari, what the hell has gotten into you?"

"Suzaku." Hikari paused momentarily, shaking her head. "I told you. I can't explain. Just... tell Mum I went to Kounan. Okay? She'll understand... it'll be all right."

"Kounan?" Arina repeated, non-plussed, and Hikari nodded, rummaging in her drawers as she pulled out odds and ends, tossing them into her bag. At length she fastened it, testing it for weight then pulling it onto her back.

"Hikari?" Arina reached out a hand to touch her friend's arm, but Hikari shook her off.

"If it's all right, I'll be back before the party." She said softly. "If not, then I'm sorry. But this... is more important. Right now... I have something else I really need to do."

Before Arina could respond, she had scooped up Hotohori's *shinken*, clutching it tightly between her fingers as she focused her thoughts on the mountain she had left behind.

"Shishi. Chichiri. Tasuki. Meikyo. Eiju. Myoume. People who are counting on me." She mused, as she felt something odd flare up inside of her. "And Jin. I'm sorry, Jin. I almost wasted your gambit... but I won't do so again. For your sake... I'm going to save Kounan. Mum was right — it's about more than individuals. And I'll find a way to be what Myoume said I was there to be, I really will. So then you won't have died in vain... you gave me your life, so I'm going to do my best to do what you wanted to do with it. I promise, Jin — I will save the Shijin-Tenchishou. No matter what it takes!"

"And then there were two."

Maichu dropped the heavy drapes back against the window, an uncharacteristically pensive look on his youthful features as he turned back towards his companion in the centre of the chamber. "Well, Kayu. You an' me are it, it looks like. Providin' Aoi gets there in one piece, of course."

"Aoi will. He's a better soldier than most of us." Kayu did not look up, his gaze instead fixed on the map that he had stretched out across

the uneven stone floor. “Maichu, come look at this, will you? It’s the chart Hyoushin-sama left with us... our routes into Kounan. He said to avoid Reikaku-zan, and I think we can... if we take this path, here.”

He indicated, and Maichu sank down beside him, following the trace of his companion’s finger as he did so. At length he nodded.

“It’ll add a few hours but I guess that’s okay.” He reflected. “All right. An’ we can split paths once we get well inside southern territory. Eiyou an’ Kahou — they aren’t that far apart, are they?”

“Jus’ don’t lose yourself in a brothel and forget your duty.” Kayu warned, sending his companion a playful grin. “I know what you’re like, and Eiyou’s Kounan’s capital. Since the war it’s meant to have gotten real profitable an’ it’s probably teeming with pretty girls. Don’t let them distract you from business, huh?”

“Hey, give me some credit.” Maichu was offended. “If the Commander didn’t trust me, he wouldn’t have chosen me! And besides, when something’s important, I’m not so easy to distract.”

He shivered, biting his lip.

“Tell you the truth, Kayu, I’d do anything rather than get on that damn boat again.” He admitted. “If spyin’ on Kounan is it, well, count me in. At least it’s on land.”

“You and Aoi are a funny pair.” Kayu reflected, sitting back on his heels as he rolled the scroll up, setting it aside. “You get seasick, he gets blood-sick. Although...”

He frowned, then,

“Do you think he’s for real, when he does that?” He asked doubtfully. Maichu looked surprised.

“Why wouldn’t he be? Yeesh, it makes the guy look like a freak... why would he want to appear weak like that?”

“Well, I know.” Kayu looked thoughtful. “But see, that’s the stupid part about it. Aoi’s probably the best soldier in the retinue — you know that I’m right. He’s been trainin’ with the Commander since before any of us were... and it isn’t just that, either. He’s a natural — he picks things up quickly and you know that in practice bouts there aren’t any of us who can beat him consistently except the Commander himself.”

“True enough.” Maichu nodded. “But I don’t see what that has to do with anything.”

“Well, why would someone that good — who’d been training that long — puke up at the sight of blood?” Kayu shrugged. “Doesn’t make much sense to me.”

“Kayu, I promise you, it ain’t an act.” Maichu said ruefully. “Listen. Noone could pull that off so well for so long — and what’d be the point, anyway? Believe me. He’s been that way since I’ve known him... I don’t think it’s pretend.”

“Maybe you’re right.” Kayu acknowledged. “You know the kid better than me. I just wonder, sometimes, whether he’s doin’ it to avoid battle, or to try and hide how good he really is for some reason. I can’t put my finger on it, you know — but there’s something about Aoi.”

“Sure.” Maichu frowned. “He’s a damn good soldier, for such a pretty face. But that’s about the size of it. He’s a natural soldier with a really bad weakness. It sucks for him, but I guess all things balance out.”

“I suppose so.” Kayu reflected. “If that’s the case, then, I hope he can handle himself in Kounan.”

He bit his lip.

“I think I’d rather assumed Aoi was faking it, because of how Kikei-sama speaks of him.” He added. “I think he thinks the same as me — that someone that good with a sword couldn’t be that much of a wimp.”

“Kikei-sama thinks so?” Maichu was startled. “Really?”

Kayu nodded.

“He told me that Aoi near passed out in the shrine one time.” He agreed. “He asked me whether it was something he always did... he seemed sceptical that the Commander would allow a weakling into his retinue. An’ that’s why I started to wonder, I s’pose. Since it’s right. Hyoushin-sama wouldn’t be that reckless.”

Maichu was silent for a while. Then he shrugged.

“Guess it’s not like that, really, with Aoi and the Commander.” He said at length. “Kayu, you should get it better even than me... I mean, I have a family, right? You an’ Aoi, you both lost yours in the war. Kikei-sama took you in, when he took in the war orphans an’ did what he could to educate ‘em an’ send them out into the world. You owe him everythin’ you have, right?”

“Yes.” Kayu looked surprised. “What about it?”

“You’d die for him, then, right?”

“If he asked me to.” Kayu agreed. “Not that I think he would... he’s a Priest, not a soldier. What are you getting at, Maichu?”

“What I mean is, you respect Lord Kikei because o’ that. Because of the shit he’s done for you an’ stuff.” Maichu replied evenly. “An’ Kikei-sama’s always favoured you, even above his other waifs. That’s why you got drafted into Kintsusei-sama’s notice, an’ it ain’t like you’re not good enough to be there, but it was Kikei-sama who did it. I think it’s sort of the same with Aoi an’ the Commander. Aoi’s a war orphan too, really. His family got slaughtered — his ma died when he was born. Hyoushin-sama more or less raised him. There’s bound to be a difference.”

“Mmm.” Kayu pursed his lips, considering. “Hell, I hadn’t thought of it like that. Maybe you’re right. Jus’ the Commander doesn’t seem like the kind of person... well, he’s strong an’ logical an’ as a tactician and a soldier I respect him like crazy. We all do. But he ain’t... a warm person, Maichu. He ain’t someone... you’d imagine was family.”

“Perhaps.” Maichu tilted his head on one side, considering. “Sometimes I wonder about that. He sent Aoi to Kounan an’ he sent him with Miramu as escort. The whole thing’s a pretty damn fine plan — crafty an’ probably the only thing we can do to get ahead of those Suzaku bastards. But you said he didn’t seem like he wanted to do it. That he was pissed about somethin’, the Commander. An’ I bet you anythin’ you like it was sendin’ Aoi into enemy country. He never shows favouritism, because he’s a better leader than that. But I dunno — I’ve always thought... well, Aoi sure as hell looks up to him as a father figure as much as he does as a Commander. An’ I would be surprised if it didn’t go the other way. Hyoushin-sama ain’t completely cold — least, I don’t think so. If he was, he’d kill anyone in our way, an’ he never does that. So sometimes... maybe it’s crazy, but it’s what I think.”

“I guess so.” Kayu smiled ruefully. “As I said, you know Aoi better. And the Commander’s never been so fond of me — he and Lord Kikei don’t get along that well. I was surprised that he picked me for this, in fact... I guess I’ve finally made him notice what kind of a soldier I am, huh?”

“This is more than soldier duty. This is Imperial espionage.” Maichu grinned. “We’ve been promoted, Kayu-kun. You, me an’ Aoi — when we get back to Kutou, we should demand a pay rise.”

“Yeah, and I’m sure you’ll go tackle the Emperor yourself about

that.” Kayu snorted. “We haven’t succeeded yet. We ain’t even hired horses... lets do one thing at a time, huh?”

“All right, I get it.” Maichu shrugged. “We’ll pull it off without a hitch an’ then — we’ll sting the Emperor for some extra coins. Okay?”

“If it does go all right.”

Kayu frowned, his gaze flitting back to the folded map, and Maichu cast him an odd look.

“What’s with that?”

“I don’t know.” Kayu admitted. “I just... can’t help thinking about that Toroki bitch an’ the weird stuff she spouted at us in that cave.”

“Hyoushin-sama said we weren’t to dwell on that. Or talk about it.” Maichu reminded him, and Kayu nodded.

“I know. But he ain’t here to hear us.” He replied. “And nor is anyone else.”

He bit his lip.

“Did you really not tell even Aoi about it?”

“I ain’t said a word, because it was an order.” Maichu said simply. “Don’t tell me you’re freakin’ out over her knowing our names, Kayu! Come on — you’re sounding like that idiot Ouno at this rate!”

“No, it ain’t that.” Kayu sighed, leaning back against the wall. “It’s just... she said about someone dying, or being betrayed... by a man of a tribe. Doesn’t that kinda... worry you a bit? That she’d say something like that — with Hyoushin-sama standing right there?”

“Not really.” Maichu shook his head. “That dame could’ve spouted any kind of crap for all we know. She probably said it *because* he was there. That’s what I think, anyhow. To confuse us. Throw us off our game.”

“But she knew our names, though.” Kayu looked troubled. “And when she said... about Byakko... mercy on my soul... what the hell was that about?”

“Shit, Kayu, quit it already.” Maichu instructed. “Toroki was blowing hot air. We got the Shinzahou. That’s what matters. And listen. She’s working on Suzaku’s side. She’s in league with Kounan. She could’ve known who we were before we got there... who knows what spies Reizeitei-sama has at Kutou’s court? You’re getting spooked over nothing. It was probably just a game on the part of the south. That’s all.”

“I suppose so.” Kayu acknowledged. “But what if it wasn’t?”

“Hrm?”

“What if there is more to it than that? Miramu did say... about her power.”

“We make our own future, don’t we?” Maichu demanded. “Ain’t much point in living if we don’t. Don’t sweat on it, Kayu-kun. Nothing’s going to happen. Besides, the only tribal man in the Emperor’s retinue is Hyoushin-sama — right? And can you see him betraying Lord Kintsusei? He’d sooner swallow his sword than use it to strike our King!”

“Yes, that’s true.” Kayu realised. “Hyoushin-sama is the last person to betray the Emperor. And I don’t think I thought that, anyway. It’s just... oh, I don’t know. It unsettled me. And now we’re not going back to Kutou... but it doesn’t matter. We’ve got more important things to worry about than some vague prophesy spouted by a half-mad Sairou witch anyway.”

“Now you’re on my wavelength.” Maichu grinned. “So on that note, lets head downstairs and drink on it, huh? We’ve no Commander to snap at us and it’s late — definitely late enough to be considered off-duty. We’ve made our plans for tomorrow — and if it makes you happier, you can be the runner into Kutou and I’ll hold back for communications. I don’t mind. So you’ve nothing to worry about.”

“I suppose you’re right.” Kayu agreed sheepishly. “All right. We’ll go get a drink and finalise details. But don’t get smashed... it’ll take two of us on our wits tomorrow to get through the border without causing suspicion and I don’t want you nursing a hangover.”

“Yes, captain.” Maichu saluted teasingly, and Kayu swiped his hand away.

“Moron.” He retorted. “You’d not act that way if the Commander was here.”

“But he ain’t. He’s heading back for Kutou as we speak.” Maichu sobered, looking thoughtful. “He really has put a lot of trust on us this time, Kayu. On all three of us. Let’s make sure we deliver, huh? For Kutou’s sake — let’s make sure we find out what he wants to know.”

Kounan.

As Arina stumbled out of her friend’s bedroom, the word echoed hauntingly in her mind, as if taunting and teasing at her senses. She

leant up against the wall, rubbing her eyes as if somehow she could reverse what she had just seen, but inwardly she knew that she could not.

“Red light.” She whispered, shaking her head as if to clear it. “Hikari... vanished into... red light. A talking alarm clock. And Kounan... shit, what the hell is going on? This is a dream. It had better be some half-assed dream, I swear. People don’t just friggin’ disappear!”

“Arina-chan?”

Miaka came out of the kitchen at that moment, pausing as she registered the schoolgirl’s distress. “What’s the matter? Aren’t you and Hikari going to catch the bus? You don’t want to be late.”

“Hikari...” Arina raised her gaze to Miaka’s quizzical hazel ones, and the older woman frowned.

“Yes?” She said softly. “Arina, you look white as a ghost — are you sure you’re feeling all right?”

“There was... light.” Arina whispered. “And Hikari said... to tell you... she was going to Kounan. She was acting... strange, Miaka-san. And then... hell, maybe it’s me. Maybe *I’m* the one acting strange. But I swear... she disappeared into the red light.”

She gazed at her friend’s mother apprehensively, waiting for Miaka to either scold her for lying or burst out laughing. Much to her surprise, however, the woman did neither. Instead she pursed her lips, a pensive look entering her gaze. Slowly she nodded.

“I see.” She said quietly.

“You don’t think that’s screwed up?” Arina demanded. “I think I sound crazy, so why don’t you think so? I haven’t a clue what I’m talking about... why are you so calm when your daughter just got sucked into a big red light?”

“I’m not.” Miaka admitted, offering Arina a rueful smile. “I’m as worried as any mother can be. But Hikari... knows what she’s doing. And I think... she’s made the right choice.”

“Huh?” Arina looked bewildered, and Miaka sighed, shaking her head.

“It’s a long and complicated story.” She murmured. “And you’ll be late for school, Arina. I don’t want that.”

“But Hikari...!”

“Hikari will be fine.” Miaka said slowly. “I have faith in it — there are friends who will make sure of it, I’m certain of that.”

“But she disappeared!”

“Yes...” Miaka hesitated, then, “What exactly happened, Arina? What exactly did you see?”

“Her alarm clock started talking. It was some girl and she was really rude about me.” Arina frowned. “At least, it sounded like it was... a person. Although... I thought it was some kind of joke Hichan was playing on me. I don’t know why — she seemed out of it this morning anyway. Then she grabbed something — it looked like some kind of a sword. And she said she was going to Kounan, and vanished in a red haze of light.”

“Then there’s no doubt.” Miaka nodded as if confirming something to herself. “Hikari’s gone back to Kounan.”

“Miaka-san, what is going on?!”

Miaka sighed, then glanced at her hands.

“You will get into trouble, if you miss classes.” She murmured, and Arina shook her head.

“Noone cares if I pass or if I even turn up to school.” She said frankly. “Dad’ll just sign any letters they send home without even reading them. They won’t be bothered at all, Miaka-san — they’re not like you and Taka-san are with Hikari.”

There was a note of bitter wistfulness in her tones, and Miaka offered her a slight smile.

“It’s rough for you, isn’t it, Arina-chan?” She said softly, and Arina shrugged.

“I’m all right.” She said frankly. “But I’m worried about Hikari. Whatever the hell’s going on — is she in some kind of trouble?”

Miaka sighed, shaking her head.

“I hope not.” She reflected. “All right, then. Come into the sitting room — I’ll pour some tea and then I’ll try and explain what you saw. I don’t think that we can avoid you knowing, since you were right there... but you’ll have to trust in me that I’m telling you the truth. Is it a deal?”

“Yes.” Arina nodded, looking surprised. “I suppose so.”

“Then go and take a seat.” Miaka gestured towards the sitting room

door. "I'll be right back."

Arina did as she was bidden, and was carefully settling herself among the cushions in the Sukunami front room by the time Miaka returned bearing two steaming mugs of tea. One of these she held out to her young companion, who took it wordlessly, and the other she kept for herself, taking a sip as she sat down in one of the empty seats.

For a moment there was silence, then,

"What I'm going to tell you is a Sukunami family secret." She said quietly. "Whether you believe me or not is up to you. But either way, Arina-chan, it must not go beyond these four walls. Is that understood? It's very important."

"All right." Arina nodded. "Like anyone would ever believe that my friend vanished in front of my eyes, anyway. I'll keep it quiet."

"Good girl." Miaka smiled, setting her mug aside. "Well, then. Where to begin."

She frowned, pursing her lips.

"I suppose, to really begin, we have to go back a long time before either of you were born." She admitted. "When I was your age, and just as afraid of failing my school exams as any of you."

"When you were... our age?" Arina's brows knitted together, and Miaka nodded.

"My closest friend then was — and actually still is — a girl by the name of Yui. Hikari's probably mentioned her as her aunt." She said thoughtfully. "And at the time, Yui was miles ahead of most people in our class. Keeping up with her was difficult and I was so keen to do well on my exams. But I wasn't a natural student — not like she was. And at that time, I thought that was more important — to pass my tests and get into a really high level school."

She sighed, folding her hands in her lap.

"It really starts one evening when Yui and I were in the National Library." She reflected. "To cut a long story short, we wound up in the restricted area, where we discovered a book called the Shijin-Tenchishou. What neither of us realised until we opened it was that this wasn't an ordinary book but a form of a spell — a gateway, if you like, into another world beyond this one."

"Another... world?" Arina, who had been going to sip her tea paused, glancing up sharply at this. "Miaka-san, that sounds nuts."

“It does, and it is, but it’s true all the same.” Miaka shrugged her shoulders. “In this other world, Yui and I were charged with the responsibility of saving two separate nations — two nations who were destined to go to war with one another. They were Kutou, in the East and Kounan, to the South. As the war got worse, so a rift developed between Yui and I. And in the end, many, many people suffered before there was finally peace.”

She sighed, glancing at her hands.

“It sounds like a fairy tale, but it was real and it happened.” She added. “And more, Hikari’s father was someone I met in that world. Someone I met and felt so completely connected to that I didn’t want to ever be separated from him. He felt the same way, and we fought tooth and nail to overcome the divide and be together. In the end, we succeeded. And returned to this world, with everything — we thought — finally over.”

“But...” Arina faltered. “You’re serious? You met your husband in a world inside a book?”

“Yes.” Miaka agreed. “It sounds somewhat cliché, doesn’t it? But that’s where Taka and I first met.”

She shrugged.

“Maybe because of that, maybe because of my own actions, it’s in Hikari’s blood too.” She added. “This connection to that world. When I was there, to help bring Kounan peace, I had to find the strength to summon a God called Suzaku — a phoenix who represented rebirth and love. That God now calls Hikari in my place... to help save Kounan once again, although in what respect I really don’t yet know.”

“Suzaku.” Arina’s eyes opened wide as she realised she’d already heard that word once that morning. “Hi-chan... she said... when I asked her what had got into her, she said Suzaku. Did she mean...?”

“Hikari is now Suzaku’s representative in Kounan.” Miaka sighed, running her fingers through her hair as she nodded her head. “Yes. I know it’s far-fetched — but that’s truly where my daughter has gone.”

She bit her lip.

“It worries me.” She admitted. “Time moves differently there, and when she came home last night, many things had already happened to her. Although she was inside the book for only a day in our time, it had been three weeks for her, in Kounan.”

“Three *weeks*?” Arina’s eyes widened. “And... dammit... that’s why

she wasn't at school yesterday? That's why Taka-san phoned in such a crazy stress wondering where she was the night before? She'd gone into this other world and you guys didn't know about it?"

"It was a bit of a surprise." Miaka agreed. "Although, when she went in — we both knew that's what had happened."

"So she was lying to me after all — she said she went to an Ancient Chinese display with her aunt and uncle."

"Well, it was only a half lie." Miaka reflected. "The world inside the Shijin-Tenchishou is effectively Ancient China in its design and social values. And she did go to the library — to find the book to take her there in the first place. I expect she didn't know how to tell you what really happened... you'd have thought her crazy."

"Right now I think it's *me* that's crazy." Arina groaned. "All of this stuff... it's nuts."

"Yes." Miaka nodded. "And it's more than that. Before she left to come back to this world, one of her allies had been killed protecting her life. To be honest, I wasn't sure whether or not she'd want to go back — and as her mother, I'm fearful for her safety. But... as Suzaku no Miko..."

She spread her hands.

"It's in her blood." She said simply. "And Kounan are counting on her in the same way they counted on me."

"Wait a minute." Arina held up her hands. "Hikari... can *die* inside this place? It's... not just some story book world — it's *real*?"

"It's real." Miaka agreed. "The rules and society are somewhat different, true, but yes, it's real. The people live and die as we do. And while she is there, Hikari's life is as much at risk as anyone else's."

"Then that sword..."

"The treasured, blessed possession of an old friend of mine and Taka's." Miaka smiled wistfully. "He died in battle during the war, but his sword has long since been a talisman protecting Suzaku's people. That Hikari had it at all is a sign that she has a special purpose in that world. And that it helped take her back — I can't imagine Hotohori would have minded her using his *shinken* to transport herself to the place he gave his life defending."

"Shit..." Arina murmured, then, as she realised whose company she was in she blushed, putting her hand over her mouth. "Sorry. I didn't mean to swear. It's just..."

“It’s all right.” Miaka shook her head. “The question is, Arina-chan — can you believe me?”

“I... haven’t a choice.” Arina swallowed hard, her throat suddenly dry. “I saw her go. I heard the voice in the clock. And the sword. The red light. Everything you said... now makes sense. I mean, it doesn’t, but... it explains what I saw. And I can’t... think of any rational explanation that would change that. Besides...”

She frowned, pursing her lips.

“If it was just Hikari saying it, I’d think she was kidding.” She admitted. “But the fact it’s *you*, Miaka-san... I *have* to believe it.”

Miaka smiled.

“I’m glad.” She said thoughtfully. “Hikari was very upset last night. I haven’t ever seen her quite like that, so I think the young man who died had come to mean a lot to her. It might be, when she comes back properly, that she’ll need a friend who understands. And now, somewhat, you do.”

Arina bit her lip, a flicker of guilt stirring in her heart as she remembered their conversation that morning. Slowly she shook her head.

“I’m not... as good a friend to Hikari... as you think I am.” She admitted haltingly. “I... I guess... I never thought about it. I mean, I could tell she wasn’t happy but... I didn’t even think...”

She trailed off, and Miaka rested a hand on her shoulder.

“Noone is a perfect friend.” She said softly. “Believe me. But you are worried about her, and that’s enough for me.”

She smiled.

“When she comes home, maybe you’ll have things to talk about.” She reflected. “Things she won’t want to tell me, because I’m her mother.”

Arina glanced at her hands.

“Maybe.” She murmured. “All... all right. I guess so.”

She sighed.

“I wish she’d told me someone had died and that she was feeling sh... bad about it.” She added. “Sometimes it seems like she doesn’t tell me anything, either.”

“Do you tell *her* everything?”

“I guess I don’t.” Arina sat back in her chair. “So I suppose it’s fair in the end.”

She frowned, glancing up at the clock.

“I should go to school.” She said unwillingly. “Even without Hichan. I’ve a quiz second period and I can’t miss it else I’ll be in real trouble.”

“Then you’d better go.” Miaka told her. “I’m sorry for keeping you.”

“No... Hikari’s more important to me than school anyway.” Arina managed a ghost of a smile, getting to her feet. “She’s probably the only real friend I actually have, so... so she better not go getting herself killed in this Kounan place.”

“I’m sure Hikari’s stronger than that.” Miaka murmured. “And I know... she has people looking out for her. It will be okay, Arina. I have faith in that... and in Suzaku’s people in Kounan to protect her. I’m sure... Hikari will be fine.”

Chapter 19

Chapter Eighteen

“Do you think it worked?”

As Chichiri set the watch to one side, taking a deep breath into his lungs to steady his fatigued body, Shishi eyed him anxiously, chewing on her lip as she settled herself more comfortably on the blue patterned *kesa*. The fabric was strange beneath her touch, almost as if it tingled with spiritual life still, and as she brushed her fingers against it, she was once more reminded of Jin.

“Well, you spoke to her.” At length, Chichiri spoke, tiredness flickering in his red eye as he met her gaze. “What she’ll do about it, I don’t know. But we made contact. Taiitsukun was right. You were the one who could reach her.”

“I guess I was.” Shishi looked startled. Then she sighed. “Chichiri, if Hiki doesn’t come back — what do we do?”

“After being threatened like that? She’d be scared not to.” Chichiri said ruefully. “Don’t worry. I’m sure she’s thinking it over carefully, Shishi-chan. I think she’ll be back. I have faith in her spirit... I don’t think she’ll abandon Kounan. She is Miaka’s daughter, after all.”

“Miaka-sama.” Shishi pursed her lips. “Suzaku no Miko is still protecting Kounan, isn’t she? I mean, by having Hiki and all... and sending her here.”

“I think so.” Chichiri nodded, sitting back against the wall as he folded his arms across his chest. “It’s not easy, though, making contact through this kind of time lapse to their world. That Hikari would transport herself there... even though she has Hotohori-sama’s *shinken*, I have to wonder about her own strength, too. Whether it means her magic is finally manifesting itself.”

“Jin died for it, so it better damn well have.” Shishi bit her lip, and Chichiri’s gaze softened. He reached out a hand to touch her shoulder, offering her a slight smile.

“Suzaku will look after Jin.” He said softly. “Believe me, he will. I know it hurts a lot for you right now, Shishi. You and Tasuki and Anzu... all of you. You’ve lost someone you love and it’s painful. I know how that feels, you know. But it will be all right. Jin gave his

life for Kounan. For that unselfish act, Suzaku will reward him. We may have lost him, but he himself isn't lost. His spirit will be blessed, I'm sure of it. And like my Seishi brethren, he will be reborn."

"I guess so." Shishi sighed. "But it doesn't help. It might be selfish as hell, but I want him back *here*. I don't want him to start a new life and forget everything — I want him to carry on with the one he had before. I didn't realise I relied on him quite as much. I took for granted that he'd always be here, like Anieue is always on the mountain with Papa. Everyone always said we'd be like them, one day. And I believed it. But even if I am Kashira, one day... Jin won't be my second. It can't happen now. Because he... he's gone."

"But if he hadn't done what he did, Reikaku-zan itself and *all* the bandits living there may have been lost." Chichiri reflected. "Listen, Shishi. Taiitsukun made it very very plain that whatever we can do to save this world, Hikari must be both alive and here in this world to achieve it. If Miramu had killed her, it's possible that her body would have retained Suzaku's divine power. That her bones would have become holy relics, and that, disgusting as it may sound, she might have remained Shinzahou. But Taiitsukun said Hikari's *active* involvement was the key. That girl has power beyond what even she realises... and we have to find a way to unlock that. Whether as Suzaku no Miko or... whatever form it takes."

"I don't want Hiki to die either." Shishi admitted. "To be honest, I wish she wasn't from the other world at all, Chichiri. Because even if she comes back now, she'll go away again in the end. When all is fixed up and everything. And I hate that... because I want her to stay here."

She grimaced, looking embarrassed.

"I never had a girl for a friend before." She added. "But even though she's a weirdo, Hiki's all right."

Chichiri's expression broke into an amused grin, and he nodded.

"You and she are much like your father and Tamahome." He agreed. "You know, I think, that they were more or less the same age when we were fighting for Suzaku together. And even though their first encounter was violent and hostile... they became very close friends."

"But Tamahome's in that world an' Papa's in this." Shishi rested her chin in her hands. "Jus' like it'll be with Hiki an' me, won't it? Is it really selfish to hate that, Chichiri? Papa at least had *you* in this world, an' Anieue, an' Okaa-san, too, when it came to it. I... I lost Jin an' I feel sort of strange without him. I know I have family, an' all — but..."

She trailed off, and Chichiri shook his head.

“Having Hikari back here will take the edge off it some.” He said wisely. “But you’re stronger than you think, trust me. Besides, you’ll have to find that strength somehow... this is just how it is. Taiitsukun is sure that you’re destined to be involved in all of this. And I think so too. Suzaku’s blood runs through your veins, after all. Your father is one of the Chosen — and Celestial Warriors are never individuals who easily fit into ordinary life. We’re not designed to do that — we’re designed to be different. For that reason, I’m sure there are not many children out there who have the same divine legacy connecting them to the Beast God that you or my own children have. Eiju and Meikyo are far too young to be involved in anything like this... but you’re not. You’re fourteen, Shishi — and with the summer drawing on, you’ll soon be fifteen. In spirit and will, you’re often older than that. So Suzaku has put his faith in you to help protect his precious treasure.”

“Papa doesn’t like that that’s the case, and Okaa-san cried about it, when he told her I had no choice.” Shishi reflected. “But the truth is, I’m glad. I mean, I don’t want to sit on the mountain an’ cry over Jin’s grave. I want to be useful. To help. To avenge him, somehow. An’ most of all, to save Kounan. Cos that’s why he died... to do that. An’ I want to make sure he didn’t die in vain.”

“Those are good sentiments.” Chichiri nodded. “Although I’m sure your father would rather you didn’t take it upon yourself to avenge his murder. Miramu — Amefuri — is a dangerous opponant. We already knew that. Now we know how dangerous, he’ll want you to steer clear even more. And we’ll be doubly vigilant to his presence, too.”

“Papa already made me promise not to go hell for leather after that guy.” Shishi sighed. “An’ he looked so serious that I promised. It’s really torn at him, losin’ Jin. I think maybe he’s scared somethin’s gonna happen to me too. But it ain’t, Chichiri. I’m not gonna let it.”

Before Chichiri could respond, a faint flicker of red light darted up the *shakujou* that leant casually against the wall beside him and he tensed, glancing at it as he reached out his fingers to touch it. Shishi bit her lip, staring at her uncle’s sudden change in demeanour as a second, then a third tongue of vermillion flame licked its way around the staff.

“Chichiri?” She murmured, and Chichiri closed his eyes, holding the *shakujouin* both hands as he concentrated the last of his energy on the intermittent flares. As he did so, the light seemed to stabilise into a haze of red, and a faint smile touched his lips.

“Thank you, Hotohori-sama.” He murmured, almost too quietly for Shishi to hear. “I’ll take it from here.”

His brow creased in concentration as the light flared more brightly, and as it spread into a ball of red energy, Shishi shuffled back, covering her eyes as she shielded them from the glare.

As the light faded, she opened her eyes cautiously, her expression becoming one of incredulity and relief as she registered the form that huddled before them on the floor. Breathing heavily, and with her dark hair tousled and flying loose around her face, Hikari crouched on the floor of the Ri family home, and as Chichiri set aside his staff, Shishi let out a yell.

“*Hiki!*” She exclaimed, flinging herself on her startled friend and hugging her tightly. “You came back!”

“Hey, are you trying to stifle me?” Hikari demanded, struggling to disentangle herself from the bandit’s eager grasp. “Shishi, stop it! You’re like a puppy gone mad — stop it!”

“You ran out on me!” Shishi objected. “You deserve to be stifled! What the hell were you playin’ at, you idiot? Leavin’ me in the desert like that? An’ after Jin... you have no idea how pissed off I am!”

But even as she said it, she knew her tone and expression belied her, and Hikari offered her a rueful smile.

“I’m sorry.” She said contritely. “It wasn’t on purpose. Me leaving, I mean. I was just... after Jin...”

She faltered, biting her lip, and Shishi nodded, gravity entering her own bronze eyes.

“Myoume came back with me.” She said softly. “An’ she arranged for people to bring Jin home, too. Like he wanted. But without you — we can’t do anythin’ else. An’ we can’t give up... because he did this so we wouldn’t. So... I’m glad you’re back. Kounan needs you.”

“Yeah, I know.” Hikari admitted.

“What the hell are you wearing?” Shishi held her friend at arm’s length. “That’s even worse than what you had on when I first met you — what the hell kind of clothing do you have in your world, anyway? Aidou-obasama will throw a fit when she sees you.”

“School uniform.” Hikari replied. “It wasn’t like I could wear... what I wore when I left. It was... there was... blood.”

She sighed, setting her bag and the divine sword down on the floor

as she cast Chichiri a glance.

“I’m sorry I caused so much trouble.” She said apologetically. “Thank you for helping me get here. I felt you reaching out for me... I know it’s because of that that I got back safely.”

“It was easy enough to follow the threads of Hotohori-sama’s spirit to guide you.” Chichiri smiled. “His *shinken* was what really brought you back. That and your own power, of course.”

He winked at her, the effect odd on his lopsided face.

“I’m glad you’re back, Hikari-chan.” He added. “And so will Meikyo and Eiju be. They’ve missed their big sister. I didn’t really know what to tell them, when Shishi came back without you.”

“Well, I’m here now.” Hikari said resolutely. “For Jin’s sake. I’m not going to run away again. Mum and I had a long chat about this last night — about what happened. She told me... some things about being Suzaku no Miko and the things that happened when she was. I know a little more now, I think. So I came back.”

She glanced around her.

“Did you say that Myoume was here too?”

“Yes, I am, Hikari.” A fresh voice came from the doorway, and Hikari turned, offering the Seishi a smile.

“I’m glad.” She said softly. “We might need your help.”

“You have it.” Myoume nodded. “I’m sorry I couldn’t prevent Jin’s death, Hikari. And even more sorry by the nature of it. But even if I did not have a blood responsibility to Kounan to repay that debt, I would be here. This is the right thing to do — to ally myself with the lion and the light.”

“What do you mean, a blood responsibility?” Hikari looked confused, and Shishi grimaced.

“Miramu — Amefuri — is Myoume’s brother.” She said quietly, and Hikari’s eyes widened.

“For real?” She whispered and Myoume nodded.

“Yes.” She admitted sadly. “We’ve been estranged for ten years — but it’s true. We are half-siblings.”

“Then it must suck doubly for you.” Hikari said frankly. “Having to fight against him.”

“It’s not a matter of that... it’s a matter of saving this world.”

Myoume said slowly. "Which is the most important thing to me."

She frowned, her gaze darting to the open door, and Shishi pursed her lips, eying her keenly.

"What?" She murmured. "Myoume, what the hell's the matter with you now?"

"Miramu." Myoume murmured, a troubled look flitting across her indigo eyes, and Hikari's expression became one of dismay.

"Miramu?" She repeated. "Wait... here? In Kounan?"

"Yes." Myoume nodded. "I can sense his life force. He's doing his best to conceal it, but I can pick it up nonetheless. He must know it's futile to hide from me."

"But... the children... if he comes to the village..." Shishi trailed off, and Myoume shook her head.

"He won't. I'll head him off." She said resolutely. "I don't think he wants to fight me, at the moment. And I'll drive him away from here. I can track his movements — and once he picks up mine, I think he'll leave."

"What if he doesn't?" Chichiri asked softly. Myoume shrugged.

"He will." She said bitterly. "Because he knows what kind of power I can unleash on him if we cross paths. Even though it would hurt me as much or more than it would him — I doubt he wants to have Toroki invade his mind. Trust me, Chichiri."

She moved towards the door, then she frowned, shaking her head.

"He's not alone." She murmured. "Someone else is with him. Or wait... no. Not with him. I can't picture it clearly, but... the spirit in his company... is on edge. Agitated. Uncertain."

"He's attacking someone?" Shishi was on her feet in a moment, and Chichiri held out his hand to stop her, shaking his head as he got to his feet.

"Let Myoume handle Miramu." He said evenly. "Remember what your father said, Shishi."

"Yes, but dammit, if he's going to hurt someone else..."

"I don't know." Myoume's eyes narrowed. "I think Miramu's chi is foxing my senses a little — it's taking so much of my concentration to pinpoint his location. But... the one with him... is not his friend. That seems clear enough."

“In which case, whoever it is could be a victim.” Chichiri reflected. Myoume hesitated, then she nodded.

“I sense blood.” She whispered. “Blood spilling. Miramu... will hurt this one. I can feel it.”

“Then we need to go do something about it.” Hikari said quietly.

“If Myoume can deal with her brother, we will.” Chichiri said firmly. “Shishi, go ask Aidou to gather together some of our remedies. We’ll go on a rescue mission. With any luck we’ll reach the individual before Miramu has a chance to kill him — Myoume, you go on ahead. We’ll follow — and take care, all right?”

“I will.” Myoume agreed grimly, and a faint flicker of white light glittered briefly in her indigo eyes. “I’m flaring my life force strongly enough for him to pick it up a mile away. If he’s got any sense, he’ll flee... leave it to me.”

With that she was gone, and Shishi hurried into the back room to find her aunt, her heart pounding in her chest at the thought of Miramu’s proximity.

“He’s so damn arrogant — how dare he come to Kounan after killing Jin!” She hissed fiercely under her breath. “Well, we’ll stop him! We’ll make him pay, dammit — he won’t hurt anyone else while he’s in the southern lands!”

“You know, Aoi-kun, if I didn’t know better, I’d think you really would rather not be travelling south with me as your companion.”

As they crossed the mountain landscape, Miramu cast his young companion a thoughtful look, and Aoi grimaced, his seiran eyes clouding as he returned the assassin’s gaze with a defiant one of his own.

“You’re perceptive.” He said quietly. “You already know I don’t like you. You’re crazy and dangerous... If it wasn’t Hyoushin-sama’s order, I wouldn’t be here now.”

“Hyoushin-sama.” Miramu repeated this, amusement flickering in his eyes as he slowly nodded his head. “You really are his little puppet, aren’t you? Of all the puppies yapping at his heels, Aoiketsu, you have to be the most eager of them all. Or is it just a case of remorse? Of carried family guilt from one generation to another?”

“Huh?” Aoiketsu started, and Miramu chuckled.

“You are *Kaiga* Aoiketsu, correct?” He asked quietly. Aoiketsu nodded.

“Yes.” He agreed warily. “What about it?”

“Well, I’ve spent the past four or five years in Kutou. I know the story of your family and many, many others.” Miramu reflected. “You’re the only son of the bastard who enslaved our favourite china statue and his kind, aren’t you?”

His eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

“That must make for an interesting working relationship.”

“My family...” Aoiketsu faltered, then he shook his head. “Hyoushin-sama’s past is private. Even I don’t know much about it. You certainly can’t claim to, so don’t bait me as if you do. Whether he was or he wasn’t a slave for Kaiga Gin is his business. It happened before I was born. Kaiga Gin died before I was born. It has nothing to do with me and the Commander knows it. He doesn’t carry grudges — he knows that I’m not the same as that man. Besides...”

He hesitated, and Miramu eyed him keenly.

“Besides, you’re not even sure you are Kaiga Aoiketsu, after all?” He asked softly, and Aoiketsu flinched, staring at him in confusion.

“What do you mean by that?” He asked softly, and Miramu shrugged.

“I heard your conversation with that block-headed friend of yours. Maichu, or whatever he calls himself.” He said carelessly. “I told you already — doubts are the only attraction in existence. The only thing that truly makes life. You can’t pretend you haven’t wondered about it, in terms of Hyoushin and the history you gloss over so easily. Even a man with no soul would balk at training the son of the one that drove it out of him... don’t you think so?”

“I don’t know what you mean.” Aoiketsu said softly, and Miramu snorted.

“Yes you do.” He said evenly. “More’s the pity, you know exactly what I mean. And you *are* curious. You do want to know why you’re so favoured among all the war-orphaned children of Kutou when it comes to the Emperor and his sidekick.”

“And I suppose you know all the answers?”

“Not at all.” Miramu looked amused. “I don’t know who you are, Aoiketsu. I only know who you are not. You are not the son of Kaiga

Gin. I'd stake my existence on that fact."

"Well, it's none of your business either way if he is or he isn't. He's dead. End of subject." Aoiketsu said shortly. "I never knew him or my mother, so what does it matter what their names are?"

"It matters to men like Hyoushin." Miramu said quietly, and Aoiketsu started at the sudden serious note in his companion's tone. "You are naïve and it makes you stupid. And pitiful, too. You don't understand anything about life yet — or the bad things that it has to offer. You're still a baby in all those things. You innocently believe that a man such as that Meihi would take you and train you regardless of your heritage... don't be a fool. Hyoushin would never have trained the son of Kaiga Gin. Never."

"What makes you so sure?" Aoiketsu was irritated by this, glaring across at his companion as his horse negotiated a difficult section of rocky track. "Stop being such a pain, Miramu. I know we have to travel together, but you've spent the whole time trying to bait me. I don't even know what you want to achieve, let alone..."

"Perhaps to show a soft-hearted, stupid little boy the cold hard facts of life." Miramu said bluntly, twitching his reins to make his steed keep pace with the young soldier's. "You are a good fighter, you ride well. You have fine features and I'm sure you must be very popular with the young ladies, back in Kutou. But you will never win a battle. You vomit at the sight of blood, like a little girl at her first town execution. You are a good student but ultimately, nothing else. A failure. Hyoushin is cold but he is no fool. He would not keep one such as you in such close proximity unless there was something more to you. And he would never have given such deference to Kaiga Gin's offspring. Never."

"I keep telling you it's not your business."

"Do you really know what being a slave is, Aoi-kun?" Miramu asked softly. Aoiketsu snorted.

"Like you'd know anything about it, either."

"I know more than you think." Miramu's eyes narrowed. "In my time travelling through the lands to Kutou... in my first year in Kutou I saw much slavery on the western border. Even though it is illegal in the East, your Emperor is unable to keep all of his people in check and so it goes on."

A dark look flickered in his indigo gaze.

"I despise slavery, and more I despise slaves." He murmured.

“People beaten or trained until they have no will of their own. People led along by false promises or the call of the divine. Such demeaned, trampled beasts, Aoi-kun. What living thing submits to such beatings or assaults day in and day out, without at least fighting for their freedom or their life? What creature allows himself to be so treated just for the meagre reward of living to see another day of work?”

He shook his head.

“Hyoushin was a slave who survived, and his slave mentality endures.” He added. “Beaten, starved, raped — I don’t know what he endured in his own personal captive hell. But he endured it. And he did not fight it. And I despise him for that. I despise him for choosing to live chained rather than to die free.”

He shrugged his shoulders, sending Aoiketsu a disparaging look.

“And he makes slaves of you all, too, the way you jump to attention when he so much as breathes.” He added disdainfully. “He is still a slave. You are all slaves. And it’s nauseating watching you all follow orders without even asking questions. Do you none of you have any respect for your own selves, Aoi-kun? Or are you so in love with your Meihi ghost of a Commander that you’ll do anything, even die to gain his cold-eyed approval?”

“You don’t know anything about us or about Hyoushin-sama.” Aoiketsu snapped back angrily. “We’re soldiers. I told you this already. We fight for Kutou, and so does he. If that makes us slaves in your eyes, fine. That’s what we are. But it doesn’t make a difference to me what word you use. We’re going to find a way to bring peace to the East. When we do, those people you mentioned — noone will be able to make them slaves ever again. Noone will be killed in fights or will go without food or water because of war. Our land will be happy. And if that costs me my life — so be it.”

“So naïve.” Miramu said cuttingly. “You really believe that it will be so simple as that? That a Beast God in the shape of a dragon can magically mend all ills?”

He snorted.

“In Sairou there are thieves and bandits. There are towns that struggle, such as Eiroku, and ones which do not.” He murmured. “There are crimes and criminals, poor and poverty. Drought and starvation. Byakko has done nothing for this land, yet still we are meant to give thanks to him for saving us. Saving us from what? Our own desert scrubland? Noone in their right mind would attack Sairou with a view to invading it. What is there here for anyone to take

pleasure in? Byakko hasn't solved all of Sairou's problems. And Seiryuu won't solve all of Kutou's. No matter how much you want to believe it."

"How did you get to be so twisted, anyway?" Aoiketsu had had enough, and he turned the tables on the assassin, glaring at him darkly. "Why are you always saying things like this? You're a man who killed his father, so don't preach to me about anything. You've the blood of innocent people on your hands — I don't have that."

"No. If you did, you'd fall off your horse and faint." Miramu said evenly. "And not all the men I've killed have been innocents, Aoiketsu. Your naivety allows you to see the world in black and white. Kutou is good, therefore Kounan is bad. Hyoushin is good, therefore Miramu is bad. But the world isn't in black and white. There are colours too... you should learn to read them."

"Hyoushin-sama *is* good. *And* loyal." Aoiketsu retorted hotly, and Miramu's eyes widened. Then he laughed.

"Aoi-kun, is it possible that your affection for your commander goes beyond that of soldier and leader?" He asked softly. "You have the pretty looks of a girl — are you drawn to him in that way, that you can defend him so readily?"

"Don't be stupid!" Aoiketsu exclaimed indignantly. "I'm as much a man as you are or Maichu is and I'm not in love with the Commander. Stop saying crazy things! But I am loyal to him. I've been with him since I was five years old — why would I not be? After all, who the hell do you think I learnt things from? He trained me. And maybe I do respect him more than just as my Commander. But what do you expect, when I've spent thirteen years of my life living up to his standards and instruction?"

"Ah. So he's your substitute father." Miramu smirked. "Cute. Very cute."

"I didn't say that."

"But it's what you imply nonetheless." Miramu glanced down at his reins thoughtfully, then, "I wonder if he knows he inspires such pointless devotion in you, Aoi-kun. It's all very touching — but rather wasted on a man whose soul was probably struck down and killed when he was first bound in chains and sold."

"He's not who you think he is."

"And perhaps the same is true of me."

“Why do you keep targeting me like this?” Aoiketsu demanded. “Why is it *me* you spew all your random crap at, huh? I don’t get it. You don’t do it to any of the others — do you just like to creep me out?”

“It passes the time.” Miramu said carelessly. “And besides, I feel a connection to you, I suppose. Maybe it’s the Western eyes. Who really knows for sure?”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“Or maybe I’m attracted to you.” He added mischievously. “Would you like that to be my answer? That your pretty looks have captivated me and induced me to tell you my darkest thoughts?”

“Do you want to make me vomit?” Aoiketsu demanded. Miramu laughed.

“I don’t mind.” He admitted. “Whatever makes you happy.”

“You’re really, really annoying — you know that?”

“I do my best.” Was Miramu’s frustrating response.

“And my eyes aren’t Western. I told you. I’m from Kutou.”

“*You* might be, but your eyes aren’t.” Miramu shrugged. “*Their* heritage is settler or Hin, like it or don’t like it. And even though you are a naïve fool, there is something about you that attracts me. I won’t deny it... of all your travel companions, Aoiketsu, you have something that they don’t.”

His eyes narrowed, as if seeing Aoiketsu for the first time.

“Your blood opened Suiko’s seal.” He added softly. “If you don’t understand the significance of that fact, I won’t be the one to explain it. But I’m sure you’re not so stupid as to not realise what it means. You’re not Kaiga Aoiketsu. You’ve never been him. And you’ve certainly no obligation to act in the name of Kutou or any other country that comes calling.”

“What are you talking about now?” Aoiketsu demanded, and Miramu chuckled.

“Give it some thought.” He advised. “You might well see that I’m right.”

“It’s not like it would change anything.” Aoiketsu shook his head. “Wherever my ancestors came from. It certainly doesn’t benefit you, Miramu — so why bother?”

“Why else?” Miramu smiled. “To create doubt, of course. To make you think. To make you see. To make you something other than just a clone of every other soldier in Kutou. You’re not every other soldier in Kutou. You’re more than they are. If you harnessed that, who knows what you could do or be? You’re not a slave, Aoiketsu. You’re not shackled to this life. You’re more than that. That’s all.”

“You really are weird, you know that?” Aoiketsu said helplessly. “I don’t understand you at all.”

“Mm... that might be as well for all concerned.” Miramu reflected. “Even I don’t spend much time trying to understand my own reasoning. It’s complex, obtuse and not always rational — so it’s probably safer you don’t attempt it.”

“Miramu!”

“I was serious, by the way, when I said not every man who died at my hand was innocent.” Miramu spoke softly, and Aoiketsu saw the flicker of solemnity return to his companion’s indigo gaze. “I killed my father because he deserved it. He destroyed my life, my sister’s life... most of all, my mother’s life. I killed him because of that. And I would do it again. This innocence you have, Aoi-kun, it’s a dangerous thing. I had it too, once, until I learnt the truth about who he was and what he had done. You need to see the world as it is, before it’s thrust in front of you in plain sight. I’m twisted, perhaps, but I’m a product of my past. Who knows how many more people will suffer because of that man’s existence?”

He turned, offering the young soldier a strange, sad smile.

“I suppose I have become fond of you.” He admitted. “It’s not like me, but in an odd way, you do remind me of myself. Your hopes and dreams are almost painful, Aoiketsu. I hate how simplistic they are, but I envy them, too. I haven’t had hopes or dreams in ten years. I’ve just existed, waiting for the day I’ll be the killed and not the killer. That’s why I ask you about your father. About your family. About who you really are.”

He fingered his collar absently, then,

“I am not Geiyo Miramu.” He owned. “That name — was a lie. Geiyo was a man my mother married, but he was not my father. Yet I still use it, because I am ashamed to align myself with my true father — the man whose blood I spilled all over the house in Eiroku. My past was dumped upon me — it came as a shock, like a bolt from the blue.”

He shrugged resignedly.

“You are not Kaiga Aoiketsu.” He continued. “Though like me, you persist in the illusion that you are. But you doubt — and because you do, you have a chance to find this and face it before it overwhelms you. The past can be a bitter thing, Aoi-kun. And not all of us can escape, when it spreads its wings over you and casts its shadow down.”

“You... almost sound human, when you speak like that.” Aoiketsu looked startled. “How many personalities do you have, Miramu? You sound sincere, but I find it hard to believe that you are. You killed a boy younger than me in that shrine, didn’t you? And you’d have killed his companions too, if not for Toroki. Yet you can say things like this...?”

“I am the product of evil, forced into existence by a sadistic force beyond my control.” Miramu said bitterly. “I taint everything I touch, because that is how and who I was born. The only escape from such a life is death — but I can’t even have that. I have tried — many times, I have tried. But each time I have survived. Toroki’s prophesy still hangs over me. I am condemned to live until the day her prediction comes true. So instead I take the lives of others. I give them the oblivion I can’t have. And so I became what I am — the assassin Miramu, the Shadow of the West.”

“Did it ever occur to you that those people might not want to die yet?”

“That’s not really my concern.” Miramu shrugged. “I don’t kill indiscriminately, you know. I have no intention of killing you, for example — even though there’s no witnesses and we’re in remote land. As I said, I *like* you — and besides, I’m being paid by your Emperor to act in Kutou’s name. There’s an element of pragmatism to my bitterness — I have to eke a living, if I must live. So I do. That’s all. I am not good at many things, but I am a good executioner. So logically this is my trade. I left home too young, after all, to make a proper apprentice.”

“Because you killed your father.”

“I gave him justice.” Miramu corrected.

“What, exactly, for?”

“He raped my mother.” Miramu said coldly, and Aoiketsu’s eyes widened at the hardness that glittered in the gemstone indigo eyes. “And I was born.”

“He...” The soldier faltered, and Miramu nodded.

“So now you understand, don’t you?” He murmured. “That if there is something... to know it by your own choice is better than to live in ignorant oblivion, waiting for the day the axe might fall.”

“But if you’d never known, would you have killed him?”

“No.” Miramu shook his head. “And he might have committed the same sin against another woman in another place. Perhaps he already did. Either way, his crimes were unforgivable. Death was deserved. I have no regrets.”

His eyes narrowed.

“I have standards too, you know.” He murmured. “I can maim, I can kill. I will do both, and I will walk away without regret. But there are things I will not stoop to. Twisted as I am, I would never do to any woman what my father did to my mother. I would never take after him... or risk spawning something into this world with as much evil as I have running through my veins.”

He lifted the reins, urging his horse into a canter.

“We should pick up the pace.” He added. “If we are to get to our destination by nightfall. I could travel more quickly alone, but you are the star attraction in this little deception — so I suppose I have to take you with me.”

Aoiketsu was silent for a moment, digesting this. Then,

“You didn’t want to kill Toroki.” He murmured, as he obediently pressed his heels to his horse’s side, forcing him on across the difficult terrain. “You kill without regrets and you seem to take pleasure in it. But you wouldn’t kill *her*. Are you really so afraid of Byakko’s revenge? You don’t sound afraid of him to me.”

“You’re more perceptive than those pretty boy looks give you credit for.” Miramu reflected. “You’re right. I’m not afraid of Byakko. He’s already inflicted enough hell on my life. Death by comparison would be a release.”

“So why so fussy? Why didn’t you kill her, if you’re so keen on bringing people oblivion?” Aoiketsu’s eyes narrowed. “She’s the one who tied you to this prediction, isn’t she? The one you hate and pity. Why not slay her and get the prediction settled and out of the way? I don’t understand. Why didn’t you face her? Why?”

Miramu did not answer right away, and Aoiketsu saw a strange look cross his companion’s face.

“If I told you that, I might *have* to kill you.” He murmured. “And I don’t want to do that. You’re far too pretty to be a corpse.”

“Will you stop taking jibes at my appearance and answer a question straight for once?” Aoiketsu was frustrated. “I’m not afraid of you. Maybe you have poisoned arrows, but as you’ve already said, I’m a good fighter. And if it’s a choice between letting you kill me and throwing up over a little blood, I’ll take my chances with the red stuff. I’m not as much of a coward as you think... you might not be able to kill me as easily as all that.”

Miramu stared at him for a moment. Then he began to laugh, nodding his head appreciatively.

“Yes, I *do* like you.” He decided. “My kindred spirit from the East, with the seiran eyes of the West.”

“Kindred spirit?” Aoiketsu arched an eyebrow, and Miramu nodded.

“Those whose destinies are entangled hopelessly in the paths their fathers chose to take.” He murmured, and Aoiketsu’s eyes narrowed.

“You do know something about my family. You lied to me.”

“Maybe.” Miramu acknowledged. “Or rather, I greatly suspect things about your family, shall we put it that way? I’m a shadow, Aoi-kun. I slip in and out of places and I learn things that people don’t know I’ve heard. Why do you think I sought you out on the boat how I did? I knew your name long before we met. I’m interested by you. Even more so now I know your blood broke Suiko’s shrine seal. It points in an intriguing direction, and if the bits and pieces I’ve put together are true...”

“Then if you won’t tell me about Toroki, tell me that!”

“And you’d believe the word of an assassin?” Miramu shook his head. “No. You can figure it out for yourself well enough. Besides, you’re about to go into an important mission for your precious commander, aren’t you? You wouldn’t want your head clouded by unnecessary details... would you?”

“Damn you.” Aoiketsu muttered, but inwardly he knew that his elusive companion was right. “Fine. I guess I do have to think like Kaiga Aoiketsu. After all, that’s who I’m going to be... even if it’s not who I actually am.”

“Such are the trials and tribulations of living a shadow-life.” Miramu observed. “But you do look like a discarded noble son. And you have the facts to back it up. Convincing the men of the South that

you are an exiled child of the slaughtered Kaiga dynasty shouldn't be too hard. Especially not since you have that ring to back up your story."

Aoiketsu glanced at his hand, nodding.

"My mother left it as a keepsake." He agreed. "She didn't leave me much... she couldn't. But she did leave me this. I know it's the Kaiga family's insignia, engraved on it. I'm not sure why, if I'm not Kaiga Gin's son... but maybe she had her reasons. There are a lot of things I'd like to ask her — but I guess the little I do know will have to get me by for the time being."

"Not to mention the fact that your Commander is indeed a former slave of the Kaiga family." Miramu said wickedly. Aoiketsu frowned.

"I don't like that fact." He owned. "Even if I'm not... Miramu, I've never seen him show true hate or resentment for anyone or anything in his past. But... when I remember that he was a slave, I... I find I'm hopeful that Kaiga Gin is not my father. Even if my true birth father was ignominious, or I was born out of wedlock, or whatever it means... even if my father was one like... like yours. Surely it can't be worse than having *that* monster of a man for a father. I don't want a blood association to such a cruel person. Even if you say it's naive — it's how I feel."

"I don't think there's a danger of that, Aoi-kun." Miramu murmured. "I am absolutely sure that you are not Kaiga Gin's son."

"I guess only my mother knew for sure." Aoiketsu sighed. "And right now, I suppose, it's all right if it stays that way."

"I think you're wrong, by the way."

"Hrm?"

"About your Commander. And hate." Miramu's eyes narrowed pensively. "He hides it well. He lives his static, sterile life... he never lets his guard down. But he has weaknesses. And I have seen it — the flicker of hate in his eyes when someone or something threatens Kintsusei-sama's life. When we first met, some years ago, the Emperor had taken serious injury in a civil uprising. Hyoushin was forced to utilise my skills rather than engage the enemy in battle with a depleted, demoralised Imperial army. And I have no doubt it killed him to do it — to send me instead of going himself. But I saw it then — the hate in his eyes as he spoke of the ones who hurt the Emperor."

"Hyoushin is loyal to the Emperor."

“Or in love with him, perhaps.”

“You have really sick thoughts sometimes, you know that?” Aoiketsu demanded, and Miramu laughed.

“But you never know.” He said flippantly. “I told you. Uncertainty. Doubt. These are my lifeblood. The one amusement I have — asking the questions no one else ever asks.”

“Hyoushin is not in love with the Emperor.” Aoiketsu said derisively. “He owes him a debt. That’s all. His freedom came at Kintsusei-sama’s hand.”

“Ah. So you know that, but nothing more about your enigmatic Commander’s past?”

“It’s not a secret.” Aoiketsu shrugged. “He’s always said that his life is the Emperor’s, because it was given him by the Emperor. So that’s how it is. People like and respect other people for other reasons than sex, you know — talking like that you sound like Maichu. I never thought I’d say that, but it’s true.”

“Perhaps.” Miramu seemed unconcerned. “Although, considering the way some of those slave-masters treat their property, it wouldn’t surprise me if Hyoushin didn’t have some expert first hand experience of all kinds of seduction techniques. And your Emperor is unmarried. Even at the age he is, he has no consort or harem...”

“Shut up!” Rage flared in Aoiketsu’s heart. “Saying things like that about the Emperor is enough to be treason, and Hyoushin-sama... Hyoushin-sama...”

“Oh, relax.” Miramu snorted. “You’re far too sensitive. And there’s nothing untrue in what I said, even if I added certain implications. Slaves are the property of the master — you really have no idea what kind of perversions a life of servitude might have instilled in your Commander. For all you know, he might secretly covet *you*...or one of your companions. Anything is possible.”

“I already told you. Shut up.” Aoiketsu said coldly. “Hyoushin-sama’s past is his business, I *told* you. And whatever happened to him, it was bad enough that he chooses not to talk about it. And we don’t ask. Ever. You’re saying things just to make me angry, because you want me to attack you — and it isn’t going to work.”

“Perhaps I am.” Miramu admitted. “Just to see if you really do have a soldier’s instinct inside of you.”

Aoiketsu brushed a finger against the hilt of his sword.

“Take my word for it that I do.” He said quietly. “And stop talking about the two people I respect most in such an ugly way.”

“I wouldn’t say ugly. Innovative, perhaps.” Miramu rubbed his chin. “Come to think of it, there are probably a lot of young men who’d find *you* of interest — no wonder this is a sore point with you. Have you been propositioned, Aoi-kun? By some bad, brawny soldier who didn’t want to take no for an answer?”

His eyes glittered with malicious amusement, and Aoiketsu shook his head slowly.

“I’m not taking your bait.” He said frankly. “No, I’ve not been propositioned. And I have no interest in other men except as comrades and Commanders. Sorry to disappoint you, but *this* pretty boy is only attracted to women. And that can wait too, until Kutou is saved.”

“Ah, there’s that fine patriotic spirit again.” Miramu remarked. “All right. But what I said about your Commander has some basis in fact. Hyoushin truly hates anyone who might hurt Kintsusei. And if he looked at you, with that ice in his eyes, you’d have no problem believing that he’d kill you where you stood. He has a reputation, you know, for beheading miscreants in a single stroke with that formidable left arm of his. No doubt with the look of the devil in his eyes, too.”

He shrugged.

“I was rather hoping to see him in action.” He added. “But so far I’ve been disappointed. It seems the only way to get that man to show any emotion at all is to royally piss him off — and even with all my attempts, I’ve not yet managed to achieve it. It’s a shame... I’d like to see if the rumours are true.”

Aoiketsu shivered, feeling faintly queasy at his companion’s casual description, and Miramu shot him a sidelong glance, amusement twitching at his lips.

“Sorry. I guess that doesn’t appeal to your feminine sensibilities.” He said frankly, and Aoiketsu glowered at him.

“I’m *not* a girl.” He snapped. “And anyone who takes pleasure in the idea of someone cutting anyone’s head off has issues!”

“Your Commander is the one with the reputation.”

“Hyoushin-sama only decapitates traitors on the orders of the Emperor.” Aoiketsu said coldly. “Which is no different from any other court — not even your Sairou one, I’m sure!”

“Perhaps.” Miramu acknowledged. “But I’m rather intrigued by the

idea of the frozen ghost meting out imperial justice.”

He reined in his horse, glancing around him as he pursed his lips.

“This is as good a place as any.” He reflected. “We’re well into Kounan’s territory now. We avoided the direct mountain path, so we haven’t met any of Tasuki’s charming bandit posse — I didn’t think that that would be a good introduction for you, to be ransacked and looted by them. Especially since you’re only interested in women — I wouldn’t like to bet that all that bunch of brawny braindeads do in their spare time is count tribute and wait for the next drink.”

He chuckled, and Aoiketsu narrowed his eyes.

“So whereabouts are we?” He asked quietly, halting his own horse as he gazed at his surroundings. “I’ve never been to Kounan before. Hyoushin-sama wanted me to be somewhere in the vicinity of Reikaku-zan... how far is that, from where we are?”

“Do you see the peaks to the East?” Miramu seemed to realise he was not going to get another rise from the young soldier, for he answered simply. He gestured towards the rising hills that loomed before them, and Aoiketsu realised that the base of the nearest was likely less than an hour’s ride away. ‘The two tallest are Reikaku-zan and Kaou-zan. Both of them are home to bandit troupes. The town glittering at the foot is known as ‘Souun’ — and it’s the centre of trade for this area, so I was told when I was last here on your Emperor’s errand. As for where we are exactly — this is the forestland between Eiyou and the villages at the foot of that mountain. Chichiri’s village isn’t far away... it seemed prudent to drop you near the apothecary’s home, rather than the bandit’s.”

“Apothecary?” Aoiketsu looked startled. “Why would I need that?”

Miramu glanced at him for a moment, then a wicked grin touched his features. There was a sudden glint of something silver, and Aoiketsu let out an exclamation, almost falling from his horse as he felt a burning pain slash through his arm. Instinctively he loosed the reins, clutching at his wounded limb, and as he did so he felt something wet and sticky oozing between his fingers. His eyes widened, as he stared at the assassin in shock.

“What the hell did you do that for?” He whispered. “Shit, Miramu, that wasn’t part of the deal!”

“Oh, come off it.” Miramu snorted. “Aoi-kao, get off your horse before you fall off. Don’t you realise that this is the perfect foil for your little deception? The wounded exile escaping the clutches of the

vicious assassin known as Miramu? Why do you think Hyoushin sent me with you? Just as a tour guide? Don't be naive."

Aoiketsu stumbled down from his mount, gripping the reins tightly as nausea and dizziness washed over him. He sank to the floor, glaring up at his companion with as much venom as he could muster.

"You're a sick, sick bastard." He muttered. "You just did that because you want me to puke up again. And you want to laugh at me... that's the real reason. It has nothing to do with... with anything else. You just like to see people bleeding."

"You hurt my feelings, saying things like that." Miramu said playfully. "I'm only acting on your Commander's instructions."

"I bet Hyoushin-sama didn't ask you to stab me!"

"No, he didn't." Miramu admitted. "But it's a logical progression from his order, and I'm an original thinker. Consider this, Aoi-kun. I'm not much loved by these Southern folk. I killed one of their own in Kitora's shrine. True, it was incidental — I didn't go there with that intention, and they rather got in my way. But I'm sure they don't see it like that. And they're more than aware of who I am, considering that I relieved them of the Seiryuu Shinzahoo. I'm their bitter enemy by now, I imagine. If they know you've been attacked by me, and somehow escaped, they're bound to take you in. An enemy of yours is an enemy of theirs... in this case, quite literally."

He smiled, bending to pull the band from his companion's thick dark hair, and as it fell loose around Aoiketsu's face, the assassin stood back as if admiring the effect.

"There. You look less like a warrior with your hair like that. More like the pretentious exiled rich boy, who's always run and never fought." He reflected. "You should make the most of your pretty looks and inbuilt weaknesses, Aoi... I think they make you rather convincing."

"Shut your face, you jerk." Aoiketsu glared up at him. "You don't have to enjoy it quite so much — and don't you dare touch me again!"

"You are sensitive." Miramu tut-tutted. "I'm only doing as I was instructed. I brought you here, I've helped you to set up your scenario."

He paused, pursing his lips.

"Besides, right now you look as pitiful as you could do." He added. "Their soft Southern hearts will fall for you in a moment, and they'll

take you in like a lost puppy. I guarantee it, Aoi-kun. I know you're a soldier, but right now even I'm having a hard time believing you can lift a sword. Speaking of which..."

He bent down, removing the soldier's weapon from his belt.

"Since you're not here on military ends, I'll take this with me."

Aoiketsu swallowed hard, cursing under his breath.

"You could've warned me you were going to cut me." He snapped. "I almost fell off the damn horse... and what am I meant to do with that, now? Hyoushin said to discard mounts before I was found!"

"I'll take the horse, too. Don't worry — I am capable of doing that, you know." Miramu assured him. "And don't look so angry. Besides, it doesn't suit your beauty. And I imagine you'll have company soon, too."

He cocked his head to one side, as if listening for something. Then he nodded.

"Time I left." He remarked. "Toroki is with them, and I'm sure by now she knows I'm here. Remember who you're meant to be, and I'm sure you'll not be killed too quickly... all right? Widen those beautiful blue eyes at them a little, bat your lashes and I know they'll take to you at once."

With that he winked, slipping his hand through the reins of Aoiketsu's horse.

"Good luck." He added. "I'll report back to your Commander that when I left you at least, you were alive and... in more or less one piece."

With that he gave his animal a spurring kick, and Aoiketsu found himself alone in the woodland of a strange country. He glanced at his injured limb, fighting the urge to be sick as he inwardly called the assassin every name he could think of.

"He might be right about tactics, but he didn't have to take such pleasure in it." He muttered. "Now if the world would stop spinning... if they're suspicious of me, I'm going to be in no shape to defend myself. And he took my damn sword, too. Right now, I don't know if they will believe me. I was attacked by Miramu and I escaped... would I believe that, if one of my friends had been killed by that man?"

He closed his eyes against his swirling surroundings, sinking back against the trunk of a tree as he struggled for something to stabilise

him. Even as he heard the sound of voices coming towards him, however, the effort was too much, and with a murmur he sank into unconsciousness as the world dimmed and faded to black.

Chapter 20

Chapter Nineteen

He was close by.

As Myoume darted through the undergrowth, tracking her way through foreign, unfamiliar terrain, she could still feel the faint but distinctive buzzing of her brother's chi echoing against her senses. He was still in Kounan, still within range, and as she remembered Jin's sacrifice anger welled through her.

"Not this time, Oniichan." She muttered, clenching her fists as she focused all her thoughts on reaching Miramu's location. "This is a place you shouldn't be. Fight me, if you must. But no more innocents. No more blood."

"You're working hard to track me down, imouto-chan."

The words echoed seemingly out of nowhere, and Myoume froze, her eyes widening as she realised for the first time in years Miramu had broken down the blockade between her thoughts and his. The gentle, telepathic communication that had bound them together when they were small washed briefly against her senses, but there was a melancholic taint to it now, and even though he had sought to answer her probing, he still held back.

She frowned, her brow creasing in confusion.

"Where are you?" She demanded, pushing the words relentlessly across the fragile connection. Without the Shinzahou, the link was tentative and easily broken, but she clung onto it, extending her power as far as she could towards the man she had always looked up to as a child.

"Nowhere you'll find me." Came the dispiriting reply. *"I told you ten years ago and I'll tell you now. I will not see you, Myoume. So don't try and seek me out. You can't conceal yourself from me any more than I can from you."*

"You can't avoid me forever." Myoume told him fiercely. "It doesn't work that way."

"We'll see about that!"

"Why did you kill Jin, Miramu?" Myoume demanded. "If you're so

dead set against bringing my prophesies to life, why did you kill him before Byakko's shrine? To taint it? All you did was act the puppet in something Byakko had already made me see. You confirm my words by your current actions — don't you understand that? The moment you severed our connection and stopped being Amefuri, you made us enemies. You can't prevent it. It will come."

"I killed him because he was in the way, not because Byakko told me to." Came the scornful reply. *"If you think you can weaken me with emotional blackmail, you really have become slow. I don't care about his life, or anyone else's. I'll fight whoever comes at me and whoever I'm charged to hunt down. You're the one I won't face, Myoume, because I will not let anyone dictate my future. If you don't like it, blame Byakko. I'm not Amefuri any more. I never will be."*

"Until you are, Onii-chan, none of this will stop." Myoume blinked back the tears that glittered in her indigo eyes.

"I am not Onii-chan, either. My name is Miramu. That's all I am to you, now." Miramu responded coolly. *"Your enemy. The Assassin. The Shadow of the West — Geiyo Miramu. Goodbye, Myoume. Don't try to find me. You know it's no good."*

Abruptly the connection was severed, and Myoume closed her eyes, reaching out as far as she could for her brother's life force. At length she frowned, leaning up against a tree as she realised he had withdrawn not only from her mind, but also from the surrounding area.

"He's left Kounan." She murmured. "Which begs the question, why did he come here in the first place? To kill? To spy? To draw me away from the others? But Chichiri is with Hikari and Shishi... and Miramu isn't near the Eastern Village now. I don't understand. Something... have I really driven him back? Does he really fear our confrontation so much that he'd run away rather than finish whatever he came to do?"

She turned around, slowly making her way back through the forestland that, now she no longer had her brother's chi to follow, suddenly seemed strange and unfamiliar. Her brows knitted together as she focused her mind instead on picking out Chichiri's energy.

"Then at least I can find them." She reasoned. "Even if I can't reach into his thoughts and tell him what happened. That Miramu would allow me to do something I haven't done since we were children... but to tell me what? In his words there was nothing new. I wish I understood... and even more, that *he* understood. So long as he

disdains his duty and forsakes Amefuri, nothing good can happen. He can't change the future any more than he can change the past... but at least if he would accept his stellar duty, it might... be different."

She sighed heavily, shaking her head.

"It's too late. He's pulled too far away to ever be rescued now." She murmured. "And I have to forget it — and focus on my duty as Toroki. This world is more important than my lost brother... I won't let Miramu's coldness shake me from my path. So long as I live, there's a chance I can change things. For now, I'll worry about that fact. When the day comes for him and me to face one another, then I'll contemplate what that will mean. Another day. Not this day. And now Hikari is in Kounan — maybe we can move forward once again."

"Do you think Myoume has tracked that bastard down?"

As the trio made their way cautiously through the land surrounding the Eastern village, it was Shishi who voiced the question, casting her uncle a quizzical look as they pushed back branches, heading deeper into the nearby forest.

At her words, Chichiri frowned, shrugging his shoulders.

"It's hard for me to say." He admitted. "I *can* sense Myoume's life force somewhat. She seems to be trying to find him, or at least, lure him to her. She's not headed in this direction, so I don't think we'll encounter the assassin ourselves. I can't find any trace of Miramu himself, though. Even when Myoume said she could sense him, I couldn't. He really is able to conceal himself completely."

He bit his lip, frustration glittering in his red eye.

"It was slow of me not to realise it sooner." He added. "But with him taking us by surprise near the border, and then Meikyo being in danger, neither encounter with him has allowed me to think rationally. That he could so easily conceal his life force from those around him suggests some level of spiritual power... I should have realised he was probably a Seishi. That he fought for Kutou also threw me somewhat — none of Seiryuu's warriors could possibly have been reborn and be the age he is. But he's not from Kutou. He's from Sairou. I should have made the connection sooner."

"It's not your fault, Chichiri." Hikari said quietly. "It wasn't obvious to anyone, what he was."

"Aside from a bandit murdering, child-stealing, sadistic creep." Shishi muttered, kicking at a stray rock on the path as if to emphasise

her point. "I don't think I could hate anyone more than I hate him. Myoume's brother or not, he doesn't deserve to even *think* the word Seishi. He's a twisted, sick bastard and I hope Myoume catches him and rips his throat out."

"I don't think she will." Chichiri reflected. "She's not spoken about it much, Shishi, but I think she still has a lot of affection for her brother."

"Why would she care about him, when he's done all of this evil stuff?" Shishi stared. "It's stupid. He's not like Jin — he's a psycho. Who could give a damn what happens to someone like that?"

"He's her brother and they grew up together." Hikari pursed her lips. "Anara-san told me they were very close as children. I'd forgotten till now — but Anara-san never actually said her son was dead. Just that he was beyond their reach and lost to them all. This must be what she meant — that Miramu had turned into... whatever the hell he thinks he is now. But he was still Myoume's brother, till he turned nuts. And Myoume probably knows more than we do about why he did."

"Even so, he murdered Jin for no reason!"

"I know." Hikari nodded. "But Shishi, if it had been the other way around, and Jin had killed someone for no reason — would you hate him for it, then?"

"He wouldn't have done it. He was Jin."

"I know that, but just supposing."

"It's stupid to even say it." Shishi said flatly. "Because Jin was Jin and Miramu is a sick, twisted bastard. No comparison is possible, so don't even try and make me sympathise with the jerk. I'm sorry for Myoume if she's crazy enough to still give a damn about him. But she really shouldn't. He doesn't deserve it. He's an asshole and if I hadn't promised Pa... Kashira I'd not go after him I'd be takin' that damn *shinken* an' thrustin' it somewhere painful."

"Shishi-chan, calm down." Chichiri said mildly. "And realise that half the forest can hear you ranting and raving. I don't mind, myself, but if there are Kaou-zan bandits in the vicinity, you'll probably be telling them exactly where Genrou's cub is, you know? And that's not a complication we need right at the moment."

"Shit." Shishi coloured, looking sheepish. "Sorry. I guess you're right. I just... I can't understand why anyone would care about Miramu. Brother or not, I'm sorry. He's crossed the line way too much

to be forgivable. She should just forget about him and move on. It'd be better for her that way, and besides, we need her help. If she's sorry for Miramu can we rely on her to fight for us?"

"Yes, I think we can." Chichiri looked thoughtful. "Maybe because of how she feels about her brother. I don't know... but I'm pretty sure Myoume's sworn her life to Byakko, and therefore to this desire to protect this world from destruction. In this Suzaku and Byakko seem to be moving together... and because of that, no matter how much it hurts her to be opposed to him, I don't think Myoume will falter. Even for her youth, she is strong. Very, very strong. Not just in power but in her conviction... she's a valuable ally for us to have. And I will feel better, if she accompanies you on your next trip. I think she will be more than adequate protection."

"We are leaving Kounan again, then?" Hikari asked softly, and Chichiri nodded his head.

"I think it's impossible for you not to have to." He agreed apologetically. "So far, Kutou have managed to take their own treasure and Byakko's, too. Both of those things were facilitated by Miramu's involvement... but now we're on more open ground. We already have *our* Shinzahou right here, in you, Hikari-chan. That leaves one other. Genbu's treasure — Takiko-sama's necklace."

"Hokkan again." Shishi shivered. "Snow and ice... providing that's where it is."

"I can't imagine it would be anywhere else, but in this instance, we have no clues to its whereabouts." Chichiri admitted. "Hokkan is a large country... which is another reason I'm glad Myoume is going with you. Her perception may be able to find clues we otherwise can't. Taiitsukun has told us nothing about the location of Genbu's treasure. But that we must track it down... I think that's imperative. We can't risk Hikari being in Kutou — not right at the moment. So it must be Hokkan."

"I guess I'm going to need warmer clothes, then." Hikari glanced down ruefully at her school uniform. "I suppose I'll talk to Aidou-san when we get back, and see what she suggests. That is, if she's speaking to me for leaving one of the outfits she made back in my world."

"If I know Aidou, she's probably already prepared for this eventuality." Chichiri reflected. "After all, since you went West, it stands to reason that, sooner or later, you'll need to go North."

"Chichiri!"

Before Hikari could reply, Shishi had darted forward, bending to pick up something that lay discarded on the ground. She held it out, and Chichiri took it, frowning as he recognised what it was.

“An arrow head.” He murmured. “But unused.”

“Miramu was here.” Hikari whispered. “That’s what it means, doesn’t it?”

“Probably.” Chichiri agreed cautiously. “Although it seems careless for a man such as him to leave such blatant evidence of his presence. I almost wonder, if he did so, whether it was a calling card. A deliberate marker — perhaps for Myoume’s benefit.”

“Bastard.” Shishi muttered. “At least it’s a normal looking arrow-head... not one of his poisoned barbs.”

“No, it’s perfectly normal. It may not belong to him at all.” Chichiri frowned, pocketing it. “But just in case...”

“Chichiri, look!” Hikari interrupted him, grabbing hold of his arm as she gestured anxiously ahead of them. “Beneath that tree — there’s someone there!”

Chichiri followed her gaze, muttering a curse as he realised she was right. He hurried forwards, his hand already on the bag of supplies as he gauged whether or not the man beneath the tree posed them any kind of a threat. As he drew closer, he registered the blood staining the young stranger’s sleeve and shirt, and from the pallor of his face and the style of his attire, he realised that the boy was both unconscious and unarmed. He frowned, relief and concern mingling through him as he knelt at the injured man’s side.

“Is he... dead?” Hikari inched forward, her expression apprehensive, and Chichiri shook his head, gently brushing the long, thick black hair out of his way as he pressed his finger gently against the boy’s throat.

“No. Unconscious, but not dead.” He said quietly. “I think we found the one Miramu was attacking... certainly he’s got quite a deep wound in his arm. It could be a defensive wound... and it’s bleeding quite heavily.”

“Who the hell *is* he?” Shishi demanded. “Look at his clothing — shit, look at his *hair*, all over the place like that! Who do you know in the mountains who dresses like that?”

“Who do you know in the mountains who dresses like me?” Hikari demanded. “It’s more important that he’s hurt, Shishi — we need to

help him. Otherwise that stupid Miramu will have killed someone else and this guy's no older than Jin by the looks of it. If it was Miramu — do you want to let him take another life?"

"Dammit, of course not." Shishi dropped down on the opposite side of the stranger, eying him pensively. "He just looks far too *pretty* and spoiled for this neck of the woods. Could'a been a bandit as sure as it was that bastard assassin. One look at him and you'd think he'd have *somethin'* to steal — what kind of idiot wanders through the trees without a sword dressed up like God knows what?"

"You think her was brought down by a common thief, perhaps, looking for treasure?" Chichiri wondered. Shishi nodded.

"Well, Kaou-zan ain't far." She added. "Think Miramu'd have left him still breathing?"

"Maybe he's been poisoned. Like Jin." Hikari murmured, and Chichiri rolled back the boy's sleeve further, examining the wound with a thoughtful eye. At length he shook his head.

"I don't think so, you know. I can't see any sign of poison." He replied. "But this *is* the work of a blade much like the one Miramu used to cut Meikyo's arm. I'd dare to say the same one — the weapon was distinctive in its edging. I didn't see the wound on Jin's body, but Miramu's knife did leave a similar wound on my daughter, when he brought it across her skin. I think we *are* dealing with someone Miramu was after — though somehow he survived the encounter. What probably happened is that Miramu detected Myoume and fled the scene — at least, it's the only thing I can think of for why he'd leave a job half-done."

"But we still don't know who he is or why Miramu wanted to kill him." Shishi repeated.

Chichiri frowned, reaching across to brush the boy's right hand.

"He's from Kutou." He said softly.

"Kutou?" Shishi's eyes widened. "Dammit, then maybe we shouldn't be helping him at all!"

"If Miramu tried to kill him, Shishi, he's not going to be on their side, now is he?" Hikari demanded. "Stop it, all right? He's hurt and I don't want to see another person die because of that creep! Even if he is from Kutou — there must have been a reason for him to be attacked."

She cast Chichiri a glance.

“How do you know he’s from Kutou anyway, Chichiri?”

“This ring.” Chichiri ran his finger over the distinctive blue and gold insignia. “That’s the crest of one of Kutou’s most influential noble houses — the family Kaiga. And the fact he hasn’t been relieved of it also suggests this was a murder for hire gone wrong, not an attack from Kaou-zan looters.”

“So he’s some rich Eastern kid?” Shishi asked. Chichiri shook his head.

“I don’t know about that.” He admitted. “When I travelled in Kutou, in the years before the war, I encountered the Kaiga family. They were very close associates of the former Emperor, Shoukitei. However, during the collapse of Kutou’s regime, Shoukitei and his principle supporters were killed. When I visited Kutou’s lands after peace had come to Kounan, I discovered that the entire Kaiga family had been eradicated by the Shougun — Nakago — and his army. Among that army was the current emperor, Shoukitei’s sole surviving son, Kintsusei.”

“Eradicated? *Slaughtered*?” Hikari whitened. “All those people... just because they were allies of the old Emperor?”

“Shoukitei was an unpleasant individual.” Chichiri said evenly. “Kaiga Gin was said to be very much the same way. I don’t think that massacre is ever the answer, but I think there were probably a lot of people who wanted to see them removed from power. And Nakago was never one to flinch at killing if it meant he obtained a particular goal for himself. That’s all I know... and if this boy is a Kaiga, I don’t know how he survived. But that ring is genuine — it’s not something that could be easily reproduced. And that it should be in his possession...”

He shrugged.

“We’ll help him, and when he recovers, we’ll tell him nothing of what we already know about the family Kaiga or Kutou’s past.” He said evenly. “We’ll just ask him who he is, and what’s happened to him. Then we’ll discover the truth of it.”

“He’s coming around.” Hikari reported, and Chichiri’s gaze flitted to the young man’s face, realising she was correct as there was a faint flickering of the stranger’s lashes. He murmured something incoherent, and Chichiri brought his hands together instinctively, in case the young man should prove to be hostile on regaining consciousness. As the injured stranger opened his eyes, however, Chichiri stared at him, all pretence at defence forgotten as he

absorbed the strange seiran shade of the youngster's gaze.

"What... who... where am I?" The stranger gasped out, and Chichiri hurriedly gathered his senses, reaching out an arm to gently bring the boy into a sitting position.

"Kounan." He said briefly. "We're not here to hurt you, so relax. Take a breath and tell us what happened — you're wounded, and we'd like to know who by."

"Wounded?" Something strange seemed to flicker across those blue eyes, almost as if memory had bit by bit returned itself to the Easterner's mind. Chichiri nodded, indicating the still bleeding arm, and at the sight of it, the stranger let out an exclamation, colour draining once more from his face.

"What the hell's the matter with you? It's a sissy cut — even a baby wouldn't make a fuss over a wound like that." Shishi said bluntly. "Yeesh, what are you? Noone dies from that kind of a wound — there's no need to look like you're about to!"

"I..." The boy swallowed hard, closing his eyes, and Chichiri was half-afraid he was about to lose consciousness one more.

"Please, don't make me see it again." He whispered. "I don't... like... blood."

Chichiri frowned, resting a gentle hand on the boy's shoulder as he did so.

"You passed out because of the bleeding before?" He asked gently. "Or because someone hit you? I need to know, because I want to help you recover."

"I... don't remember." The boy said feebly. "There was... a man... with a..knife."

He opened his eyes cautiously, but as he caught sight of the edge of his torn, bloodsoaked sleeve he paled once more, and Chichiri could tell he was fighting the urge to be sick.

"All right." He said gently. "I think the best thing would be for me to tear free this ripped sleeve and bandage your wound so it stops bleeding. Then, if you return with us to my home, I'll see to doing something more about it. But if it's causing you distress, that should be our first focus. Sit very still, please... and if it distresses you, look away from it. I'll do what I can to stem the bleeding."

With one sweeping gesture he pulled the rest of the ripped sleeve free of the bloodsoaked arm, carefully wiping the worst of the reddish

liquid away as he tied a strip of fabric around the boy's upper arm, neatly halting the pooling flow of liquid as he knotted it tightly. As he did so, the stranger let out a heavy sigh, and although it was clear the procedure had caused him some discomfort, his expression seemed more to be one of relief than it did of pain.

"Thank you." He murmured. "I... I'm sorry to be... so much trouble."

"What's your name?" Hikari settled herself more comfortably by the injured boy's side, sending him a hesitant smile as he did so, and the stranger eyed her in confusion, almost as if he was trying to assess her motives. At length he sighed, and some of the tension seemed to seep out of his young body.

"Aoiketsu." He murmured softly. "K... Kaiga... Aoiketsu."

"Kaiga!" Shishi's eyes widened, and she glanced at Chichiri, who nodded.

"You're a long way from home, Aoiketsu-kun." He said evenly. "How did you come to be here, in the Southern lands, when you speak with an Eastern accent?"

"Kounan..." Now that the wound was no longer within his line of sight, Aoiketsu seemed to be regaining his wits and he struggled into a more steady sitting position, glancing at his rescuers one at a time. "Wait... who are you people? Where in Kounan am I? What happened to... I was..."

He trailed off, biting his lip, and Chichiri sat back, registering the wary expression that had darkened the man's blue eyes.

"We don't mean you harm." He said at length. "My name is Ri Hou Jun, and this is my niece, Shishi, and my ward, Hikari. We heard there was someone in distress in the forest, so we came to see. I'm the apothecary for the local village, so I thought maybe I could be of assistance."

"Apothecary..." Aoiketsu repeated the word softly, as if it carried particular resonance. Then he offered a faint smile.

"I'm sorry, Ri-san. I have forgotten my manners." He said sheepishly. "I'm afraid I become unsettled at the sight of blood — and I have failed to thank you for your kindness."

"So, you really come from Kutou?" Shishi crossed her legs, peering at Aoiketsu as if he was a zoo exhibit. The young man nodded his head.

“By birth, yes.” He agreed, wincing slightly as Chichiri’s ministrings edged close to the edge of the jagged gash. “Although more recently I’ve been in Hokkan or now, here, in Kounan. My family were all slain before I was born — all except my mother, who somehow escaped long enough to give birth to me. Then she died, and I’ve been in hiding ever since. When the Emperor’s men were sighted up north, I thought I’d have to leave... I even wondered if they’d come looking for me. Technically I’m the heir to the Kaiga estate, and I suppose they think I might raise an army and come try and claim my family’s lands. Only I had a run in with a man... an assassin by the name of Miramu.”

“We know all about Miramu.” Shishi said darkly. “He’s no friend of ours, believe me. He already killed my brother... it’s a miracle he didn’t do the same to you, too.”

“Your brother?” Aoiketsu repeated softly. “I... I’m sorry. I didn’t realise.”

“Why would you?” Shishi sent him a funny look. “Your blood loss must’ve gone to your head, Aoiketsu... you should just thank the Gods you got away.”

“You’re right.” Aoiketsu agreed, looking sheepish. “Although it concerns me that he came. I think... he was acting on the orders of people back in Kutou. They must truly consider my living a threat.”

“*You* couldn’t raise an army.” Shishi snorted. “A wimp who goes white at the sight of a little blood? They should give up — you’re no threat to them.”

“This will sting a little.” Chichiri put in at that moment, as he folded over a square of clean cloth, dipping it into one of the herbal concoctions he had learnt from Mitsukake before pressing it to the wound. “But it’ll be over in a moment, I promise... and it will help to stop your injury becoming infected.”

“So what do we do with him, now he’s here?” Shishi asked.

“Can he stay with you, Chichiri? In the Eastern Village?” Hikari looked quizzical, and Aoiketsu faltered, his blue eyes becoming big as he stared at the apothecary as if seeing him for the first time.

“*Chichiri?*” He whispered, and Chichiri offered him a lopsided smile, pausing in his work as he nodded his head.

“That’s the other name I’m generally known by, in these parts.” He agreed evenly.

"I'm sorry." Hikari looked stricken. "Should I not have... said that?"

"It's all right." Chichiri shook his head. "In this neck of the woods, there are few people who aren't aware of it. It's not a secret."

He cast Aoiketsu an interested look.

"I'm not surprised that you understand its significance... I'm sure that even in exile, a descendant of one of Kutou's noble houses would find time to learn about the world in which he lives."

"I've always studied." Aoiketsu nodded. "The... the man who raised me made sure of it. That I could read, and write, and understand everything I would need to be the man I have to be."

"I didn't know you could have lessons in being a sissy." Shishi said, amused, and Aoiketsu shot her a dark look.

"I can't help it." he retorted. "It's just the way I've always been. Noone chooses to be squeamish, you know. Some people just are."

"Yes. Sissies." Shishi agreed. "But I guess, if you're some rich guy's spawn, it explains it. Most of those kind of people sit back and let everyone else do the hard work for them."

"So you do have someone... a manservant, perhaps?" Chichiri suggested, and Aoiketsu shook his head.

"I'm quite alone." He replied. "He... is no longer with me."

Chichiri frowned, pursing his lips as he interpreted the boy's reticence.

"I see." He said softly. "I'm sorry."

"I know the legend of the four Gods." Aoiketsu eyed Chichiri almost as if he was sizing up a potential predator for hidden claws. "Nakago was in charge of the army who slew the Kaiga family, so I'm well familiar with them and their so called divine power. But I only know the names of the other constellations — of Byakko, Suzaku and Genbu. Are you... truly the man born under Suzaku's sign of Chichiri? Is that... really who you are?"

"Yes." Chichiri agreed. "But I don't subscribe to the same philosophies of life as Kutou's blue-eyed avenger. I'd rather preserve life, not end it. Particularly innocent life caught in the crossfire."

He smiled.

"You can call me Chichiri, or Ri-san. I don't mind which." He added.

“You’re kind.” Aoiketsu offered a faint smile in return. “But it... may not be wise for me to spend too much time near here. I don’t want to bring danger on your heads, especially if this assassin has already killed a friend of yours. If this is near a village, then I’m sure there are children who might get hurt.”

“Yes.” Chichiri frowned. “Miramu doesn’t have any respect for borders... he’s already put my own daughter in harm’s way. But that’s beside the point at the moment.”

He reached out to touch the young man’s ring.

“Tell me, what was your mother’s name?” He asked softly. “Because this ring... surely...”

“Ruiren.” Aoiketsu looked surprised. “Kaiga Ruiren. She was Kaiga Gin’s widow — this ring was his and she gave it to me when I was born. It was a keepsake, because she knew she was dying and she didn’t want me to lose all connection to my heritage.”

“I see.” Chichiri’s gaze softened. “I met Kaiga Ruiren, once, though I never met her husband Lord Gin. She was a very beautiful woman — and I can see her features in your face, now I look at you again. It explains why you have the ring — in Kutou, to hold the ring of the family crest is to signify that you are effectively head of that family — correct?”

“Yes.” Aoiketsu nodded slowly. “You’ve been to Kutou a lot, then, Chichiri-san?”

“In the past.” Chichiri agreed. “Before the war, and before it mattered to anyone that I was more than just Ri Hou Jun. So I suppose by having that ring, you might be able to claim the land.”

“I don’t want to.” Aoiketsu admitted. “Not if it’ll get me killed. I just want them to leave me alone. And I really don’t want to cause harm to people who’ve probably just saved my life.”

“But now you’re here, we can’t just abandon you. Not if Miramu is after you.” Hikari pursed her lips, casting Chichiri a glance. “Chichiri? What do you think?”

“Well, the wound will heal.” Chichiri wound a thick white bandage around the man’s arm, offering the girl a smile. “But he does have a point. Even if it’s not his own fault, his being here could prove dangerous not just for my children but the others in the Eastern village and even so far as Souun.”

“We can’t just let that jerk to have a second shot, though.” Hikari

objected. “Can we? Miramu already killed Jin — we know he doesn’t bluff.”

“So what, we take him *with* us?” Shishi’s eyes widened. “Hiki, are you nuts? He’s soft in the head, and he’d be a liability from the get-go!”

“With you...?” Aoiketsu looked startled. “I’m sorry — take me... where, precisely?”

“Shut up.” Shishi told him firmly. “There’s no point in you coming with us anyway. You’d probably get us all killed, if you vomit at the sight of blood. Believe me, we don’t need to be babysitting some Kutou exile, no matter whether Miramu is his enemy or not.”

“But if he was with us, Myoume would always know if Miramu was around.” Hikari reminded her. “So we’d be ready, if danger struck again.”

“But *look* at him, Hiki!” Shishi objected. “It’s not like travelling with Jin. Jin could fight! Even if Myoume *is* strong, what do you suppose he’d do if we were faced with a situation like we were in Sairou?”

“But that’s just it.” Hikari sighed, casting Aoiketsu a glance. “I... I want to help him, Shishi. I mean, I’m weak, too. I can’t fight, either. Because of me, Jin gave his life — even if noone blames me, it’s still why he did the thing he did. And I... I hate that I couldn’t do anything to save him. But I... I can help Aoiketsu. And I want... I want to stop him from getting killed by that bastard Byakko Seishi...”

“Byakko...?” Aoiketsu’s eyes almost dropped out of his head, and he swallowed hard, clearly startled. “But... are you saying that this Miramu is...?”

“Amefuri.” Shishi nodded her head. “Jerk though he is, he’s turned tail on his divine responsibilities and become a real pain in the ass for everyone. Especially us. He’s meant to protect Byakko’s Shinzahou... but he decided it would be more fun to be an arrow-happy bandit killer instead. And even worse, Miramu’s definitely in the Kutou Emperor’s pocket... lets just say that his murderin’ Jin wasn’t the only time he’s done something crappy in our line of sight. You’re just the next in a long list of atrocities — the difference is, *you’re* still alive.”

There was a faint note of bitterness in her words, and Chichiri shook his head reproachfully.

“That’s not his fault, Shishi.” He chided. “Don’t say it like he should feel guilty. Jin’s dying has nothing to do with Aoiketsu’s survival... I

know how you're feeling, but don't take it out on a stranger."

"I'm sorry." Shishi looked guilty. "I just... it pisses me off, that's all. All of it. When Jin fought so hard, and this guy..."

She trailed off, shaking her head slowly.

"It doesn't make sense." She murmured.

"I see." Aoiketsu looked grave. "I'm sorry then, for being alive and useless, Shishi-san."

"Nobody is useless." Chichiri said frankly. "But Shishi is right when she says you are lucky to be alive."

"No kidding." Shishi agreed.

"Taking him with you could be a danger in itself, you know, Hikari." Chichiri sat back on his heels, considering. "If he stayed here, it would be dangerous for the village. But if there really is a contract out on his life, it *would* attract Miramu's attention to you. He's already far too interested in what you're about — as Jin's death has sadly proven."

"True." Hikari agreed, drawing her knees up to her chest. "But the thing is, I don't see what else we can do. Like I said, we will have Myoume with us. And Miramu doesn't seem to want to hurt her, whatever he feels about the rest of us. He seems to avoid her if he can. So that'd help. Besides, either way, we can't sit around here... we're already wasting time."

"Excuse me..." Aoiketsu spoke hesitantly, then, "Where are you... we... where might we be going, please?"

"Hokkan." Shishi said frankly.

"Hokkan?" Aoiketsu looked surprised, and Hikari nodded.

"We have to go back north, and try and find out what we can about Genbu's Shinzahoo." She agreed. "And we need to find the holy relic left behind by the Beast God somewhere in Hokkan."

"And that's a long way from here... some days at least." Chichiri acknowledged.

"Unless Hiki can take us quicker." Shishi eyed her friend, and Hikari shrugged.

"I doubt it." She said with a sigh. "My magic is still really, really unreliable, Shishi. We might end up anywhere... if we even moved at all. You know that the only times I've been able to really use it have

been instinctive... and I've not yet managed to take anyone anywhere except myself. Even if I did... go home. It doesn't mean I have any more control than I did before."

"You think... I should go to Hokkan with you?" Aoiketsu was doubtful. "But I... I'm not very useful. It's like your friend says, Hikari-san. I'm just a noble son who's not much good for anything."

"That's *why* I want you to come." Hikari admitted ruefully. "Because maybe we can protect you. And I'm sick of being the protected one. I'm sick of being the most useless member of the party. If you're weak, Aoiketsu, I kinda identify with that. Besides, I think... it would be better. Myoume is the only one who always knows when Miramu is around."

"Who is this Myoume?" Aoiketsu's brows knitted. "I'm really not so sure about this idea. I... I think..."

"Don't think and don't argue." Shishi said evenly. "We don't have the time to waste on either. It's already pathetic enough that you might have to be protected by girls... don't make it worse by trying to have an opinion about it, okay?"

"Myoume is Toroki. One of Byakko's, like Miramu." Hikari explained, before Aoiketsu could respond to Shishi's cutting words. "She's strong, Aoiketsu. And she'll be able to tell when Miramu's around. They're brother and sister, so she always knows."

"Brother and sister." Aoiketsu's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "I see."

"We can trust her." Hikari said hastily. "They're estranged — don't worry. She isn't working with him, or anything. The opposite, actually. She probably was the thing that drove him away from you and saved your life. Because she sensed he was around, we came to help."

"Then I suppose you're right." Aoiketsu hesitated, then, "But even so, going North..."

"We really shouldn't be wasting time playing nursemaid." Shishi said categorically, getting to her feet. "So far, Kutou have two Shinzahou, and two relics. We have one Shinzahou, an' we know where Suzaku's relic is. But Genbu's is still open season. An' we need to get there first. If he's just going to be a wishy-washy idiot even about making a decision like that... if he don't want our protection, lets ditch him already. He's no real use to us, after all."

"Shishi!" Hikari glared at her. "*Jin* would never say that and you know it... don't be so cold!"

“Jin ain’t here to ask.” Shishi said smartly.

“Even so, Hikari’s probably right.” Chichiri reflected. “And I think the safest option would be for Aoiketsu to accompany you girls when you go North. If only to preserve his safety until we find a way to deal with Miramu conclusively.”

“You think we should protect him too?” Shishi looked startled, and Chichiri nodded his head.

“I do.” He agreed gravely. “Because he’s a target, just like Jin was. And he’s not much older. You can’t be more than eighteen summers, Aoiketsu-kun — am I right?”

“I was born three months after the end of the war with Kounan.” Aoiketsu agreed. “So yes. I’m eighteen.”

“Too young to die.” Chichiri murmured, as memories of the friends he’d lost flitted through his thoughts. “Yes, Shishi. If we can preserve life, we must. That’s what Suzaku would want us to do, you know. Aoiketsu was born in Kutou, but he’s not our enemy. So we mustn’t treat him like he is. If we do, then we become like the people we’re fighting, making every innocent bystander and civilian a target just based on their country of origin.”

Shishi chewed her lip pensively.

“Guess you’re right.” She admitted. “All right. I suppose so. I suppose Jin’d think so, too. But dammit, I’m goin’ to have to kick some spirit an’ fight into him, if that’s the case. Because I ain’t takin’ a guy with us who can’t even hold a sword.”

“I’m sure you’ll have plenty of time to discuss that, when you begin your journey.” Chichiri said evenly. “For now, though, I think going back to the village is a better idea. I’d like to have a proper chance to look at Aoiketsu’s wound, and to clean it thoroughly. Besides, Myoume will have returned by now, I think — and I want to mention this to her, too. Especially if I’m going to trust the quest for the Shinzahou in her hands.”

“You keep saying that word.” Aoiketsu frowned. “But... what’s a Shin... zahou?”

“A holy treasure, left behind by the Gods of each land after their summoning ceremony.” Hikari said with a sigh. “And right now, Kutou have one more than we do. They already used dirty tricks to get Seiryuu’s, and robbed Myoume blind to take Byakko’s. We can’t let them get Genbu’s, as well.”

“And so long as *you’re* here, Hiki, they can’t get Suzaku’s.” Shishi said decidedly. “Well? Are we going, then? Even if Miramu’s not around, Kaou-zan bandits might be, and if nothing else, I’m startin’ to get hungry. Besides, we *don’t* have time to sit around like lemons. We’ve got a lot of shit to get sorted out now Hiki’s back — especially if wimp-boy here is coming with us!”

“Are you all right to walk?” Hikari cast Aoiketsu a hesitant look. “You are still pale, but Shishi is right. And it *would* be safer for you to stick with us... at least until Miramu’s lost interest in finding you.”

“You’ve been kind to me, but I don’t want to burden you.” Aoiketsu looked hesitant. “So long as I can’t see the blood, I feel much better, but... are you sure I should come with you?”

“You said you’ve been to Hokkan, right?” Shishi eyed him curiously, and Aoiketsu nodded.

“Yes... in a manner of speaking.” He agreed. “I spent time in the capital. When the Kutou Emperor’s men were around, I hid... in a cave on Koku-zan. It was full of bones, and not very pleasant... I’m not sure I want to go back any time soon.”

“Koku-zan, huh?” Chichiri’s expression became thoughtful. “Then you know the mountain path from the capital to the peak?”

“Yes.” Aoiketsu confirmed, surprise in his seiran eyes. “What about it?”

“It seems as good a place to begin the search as any, considering it once housed the Shinzahou, a long time ago.” Chichiri smiled. “Perhaps Aoiketsu will be a greater asset to your party than you think, Shishi-chan.”

“If that’s so, I guess you might have a use, after all.” Shishi glanced at Hikari, who nodded.

“Definitely.” She agreed. “Except for visiting Koutaku-san’s house, we haven’t spent much time in the North country, and I... I really don’t know much about Hokkan at all. I don’t even know what their capital city is called.”

“Touran.” Aoiketsu said frankly. “And if that’s where you’re going, I... I can help guide you there. If you think... it would help.”

“Then it’s decided.” Shishi nodded. “So long as you do your share of walking, and you don’t whine, you can take us to Touran and we’ll make sure you don’t get a slit throat. Providing you don’t have a completely stupid sense of direction to go with your sissiness, that

seems reasonable. Fair enough?"

Aoiketsu's face paled slightly at her brutal assessment, and Hikari reached out to squeeze his hand.

"Is it a deal?" She asked quietly. Aoiketsu seemed to rouse himself from his reverie, nodding his head.

"All right." He agreed. "I'll help you get to Touran."

"Then it's settled." Shishi sighed. "Shit, I wish even more that Jin would be coming too — it's going to take all of us just to keep this one out of trouble."

"I'm not afraid of walking, Shishi-san." Aoiketsu pulled himself unsteadily to his feet, glancing at his now bound arm, and offering Chichiri a grateful smile. "Thank you. And I believe I can walk — to the village, at least. I may not be cut out for violence, but I have travelled and I can read maps... my navigation is good and I have a quick memory. If you really think I can be of assistance, then I will come with you to the North."

He paused, then,

"If I might ask a favour in return?" He asked softly, rubbing his fingers absently against the ring as he did so, and Hikari sent him a questioning look.

"What kind of a favour?" She asked curiously, and Aoiketsu smiled.

"I'd rather be called Aoi." He admitted. "Aoiketsu is an unusual name, after all. It's more easy for someone to find an Aoiketsu, whereas Aoi is less distinctive. Plus... it sounds more... friendly."

"Friendly, huh?" Shishi eyed him keenly. "Sure. I guess that's okay by me. You can be Aoi. After all, it's fitting — since that's the colour your face goes when you see blood."

"Shishi." Hikari sent her friend a rueful smile, and Shishi shrugged.

"It's true." She said frankly. "So we'll go back to the village and see what Myoume has to say about Miramu. Hopefully he's got the message he's really not welcome and he's cleared off back to the East or something. But even if he hasn't, she'll make sure he doesn't come near the village again."

"Then I guess you're coming back there with us right now." Hikari shot Aoiketsu a friendly smile. "I guess this is kind of like saying welcome to Kounan, Aoi-kun!"

Chapter 21

Chapter Twenty

So, they were back in Kutou.

Hyoushin halted his horse at the gates to the Kutou palace, returning the salute of the officer on duty as he cast the man a grave smile. Despite the fact they had had no trouble on the return voyage, and that they came bearing the treasures of Sairou, the pale-skinned Meihi found that his thoughts were still preoccupied and troubled by the decision he had made in Hengei.

“To send my three best soldiers into enemy country... and one of them in the company of an unpredictable assassin.” He mused, even as he dismounted his beast, handing over the reins to a waiting groomsman as he gestured for his fellow soldiers to follow suit. “It is a gamble, without a doubt. I hope it is a gamble which pays off. There are scant few men in whom I place absolute trust — I hope I have not weakened my Emperor’s stand by sending the ones I have.”

“Hyoushin!”

The voice of the Emperor startled him back to himself and he smiled ruefully, dismissing the tired soldiers as he turned to face his companion.

“You’ve made good time.” Kintsusei sent his friend a relieved grin, patting him on the shoulder as he indicated that they should walk together towards Seiryuu’s shrine. “Ever since Miramu returned to the palace, I’ve been concerned for your safe transport home — even with Suiko’s help.”

“Yes. Suiko’s help.” Hyoushin’s gaze flitted to the mage, who, unlike the soldiers, had not dispersed. Instead she had chosen to trail them to the shrine at just enough distance that she could hear everything they said, and from the petulant expression on her face, it was clear she was not happy to have been ignored. “I’m not sure how much faith to place in that... although I admit, she did have her uses.”

“I heard that, mean Hyoushin.” The mage retorted, spreading her hands as warning trickles of water bubbled up against the edges of the stone-slab pathway. “Don’t talk about me behind my back!”

“It isn’t polite to eavesdrop, Suiko.” Hyoushin said levelly. “So that

makes us even, I think. Besides, this is a private conversation in any case. I have to make report to my Emperor — you are dismissed, just as the other men. I have no need of you immediately, and I'm sure Kintsusei-sama doesn't want to be troubled by your games. Go find a pool to play in — I'm sure if we require your assistance, we will be able to find you."

"Hyoushin?" Kintsusei cast his companion a confused look, and the Meihi shook his head.

"Suiko does not understand anything but the bluntest of instruction, it seems." He said regretfully. "And even then she seems to choose which orders she should and should not obey."

"I'm not a dog." Suiko bristled. "I'm Seiryuu-kami-sama's guardian spirit, and..."

"And you have likely done a fine job guiding my ship home, but you must be tired." Kintsusei said softly. "Rest, Suiko. We will speak later... the trip to the dusty lands must have been a trial for you and your water-based magic."

Suiko paused in mid-rant, her eyes opening wide as she digested the Emperor's words. Then, very pointedly, she bowed towards him.

"I understand, Koutei-heika." She said lightly. "I will do as you say. Please, call on me if you need my help again."

With that she skipped off towards the rear grounds of the palace, and Hyoushin shook his head slowly.

"You always have a way with difficult individuals." He observed frankly. "I won't pretend I am not glad to be free of her company."

"She's been troublesome?" Kintsusei questioned, and Hyoushin spread his hands.

"Define troublesome." He admitted at length. "She is a very... tactile creature, Kintsusei-sama. And she likes to hang all over me, to cause me as much annoyance as she possibly can. It is true that her magic came into its own in Sairou on several occasions... but between her spoiled routine and Miramu's unpredictability, it was not an easy quest."

"Yet you succeeded." Kintsusei smiled. "I am sorry to send you into such situations, my friend. And if you would like, I will command Suiko to be more prudent in her behaviour."

"I doubt it will have much effect, even if you did." Hyoushin shook his head. "She has listened to you now, my Lord — but her moods are

mercurial and she changes tack from second to second. It is difficult to keep up.”

“I suppose that sending a woman — even a woman like Suiko — on a voyage with militarily trained men was always going to be a problematic situation.” Kintsusei rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “But you seem to have managed. I’m glad. And gladder still to have you returned — albeit in depleted numbers.”

“Indeed.” Hyoushin inclined his head. “Did you say that Miramu has already come back to Kutou?”

“He arrived this morning.” Kintsusei nodded. Hyoushin’s eyes narrowed.

“He has conducted his latest mission without complication?”

“According to the assassin’s words, he parted company with Aoiketsu as agreed, in the forestland surrounding Kounan’s western mountain country.” Kintsusei nodded. “But if you want to speak to him yourself about it, be my guest.”

“I will.” Hyoushin agreed. “And by now, Kayu and Maichu will have also crossed into Kounan. I expect to hear from one of them by the end of next week, if all goes well. What our movements are until then are up to you, my Lord.”

He eyed his companion quizzically.

“Lord Kikei is not put out that I chose to send Kayu on such a mission? He has, I know, special interest in the boy as one of his waifs.”

“No. Actually, he seemed quite pleased you’d placed trust in the lad.” Kintsusei smiled. “But I know you don’t do things rashly, Hyoushin. Kayu’s a fine soldier, I know that — but you must feel he’s come on further, to trust him in this way.”

“Yes.” Hyoushin frowned. “It is rather a test of character, perhaps. But he is with Maichu — and impulsive and indolent as that boy can be when he chooses, he’s also one of the best young fighters I’ve ever trained. He’s not on a par with Aoiketsu in his native battle instinct and understanding of enemy positions. But he is far superior to any other man I’ve trained — I believe that, although Kayu is the elder, he may learn from Maichu’s opportunism.”

“Well, all we can do is wait for word from them, then.” Kintsusei reflected. “In the meantime, come speak to Kikei and to Miramu. Now you’ve returned, we have to discuss the possibility of raising Byakko’s

guardian spirit. I wasn't sure if it would be possible, but Miramu says that it is — and more, that he knows a spell to do it."

"A spell." Hyoushin's eyes narrowed. "Has he told us how he came by this information, or does he persist in keeping secret the true nature of his connection to Toroki?"

"He's said nothing, and I have not asked." Kintsusei shook his head. "In the end, so long as he has the information we need, I don't suppose it is important. Men such as him must have their secrets — and it is better that he hides something of this nature than something more serious."

"Considering the nature of the man, I would be surprised if he was not hiding a good deal more from us." Hyoushin sighed. "In Eiroku, we encountered angry townsfolk baying for his blood, my Lord. And I did not like to have to bribe them to let us through — they would have lynched him for the murder of his father, and I confess, I understood their feelings. To protect the life of such a man — when he elicited that promise from you, Sire, I'm sure he knew that such an event would occur. I hope that he... will not be accompanying me on any more travels."

"I think it's unlikely." Kintsusei smiled. "He knows nothing of Hokkan, by his own admission. And I wouldn't send him into Kounan again, because now he's too well known down there and after the death of one of Suzaku's bandits, I'm sure that they know he's affiliated with us. It would be a foolish risk... next time he might kill someone important."

"Yes." Hyoushin agreed, as they reached the door of the shrine, the guard on duty bowing before the Emperor as he opened the door to admit them.

"Lord Kikei is within, sire." The man said, and Kintsusei nodded.

"Thank you." He responded. "We will join him immediately."

Inside the shrine, the holy flame was already burning, and Hyoushin could make out the hunched, white-bearded form of the priest as he huddled over his old books, evidently poring over them for a particular prayer or incantation. At their entrance, however, he discarded his work, bowing his head in acknowledgement of their presence.

"My Lord — so Hyoushin has finally returned, has he?" He said softly, and Hyoushin's eyes narrowed slightly.

"Unfortunately boats are not instantaneous forms of transport, and

Sairou is a good distance from Kutou.” He said softly. “My apologies for the inconvenience, Kikei-sama.”

He fumbled at his belt, holding out the cloth bag that contained the mirror, and the small bone casket that Miramu had killed the bandit to obtain. Kikei’s greedy eyes flitted over them, and as he took them from the Meihi’s grasp, he set them down on the stone shelf beside the fire, pushing back the fabric protector to reveal the glitter of Byakko’s *te-kagami*.

“Well.” He murmured. “So now we have another piece in Kutou’s puzzle... the quest for peace grows ever closer.”

He smiled.

“And I understand Miramu was able to be of great help.” He added. Hyoushin nodded.

“He did indeed lead us to the location of the mirror, and he himself retrieved the fang.” He agreed. “Though I have not attempted to open the casket. I do not know how to — though my Emperor says that Miramu knows a spell by which one can raise Byakko’s mage. If this is so, maybe he can also unlock the bone chest that he retrieved at such grave personal risk.”

“That almost sounded like a criticism, Hyoushin.”

The assassin’s voice rang out from the back of the chamber, and Hyoushin glanced up, meeting Miramu’s teasing indigo gaze as he did so. His eyes narrowed.

“You were here all the time?” He asked softly, and Miramu laughed.

“I like to listen before I speak.” He agreed. “But I’m surprised — are we on such hostile terms after travelling so merrily together, Hyoushin? I did, after all, keep my part of the bargain. And at my own risk, I took your man deep into the enemy’s territory, also. I have become rather invaluable to Kutou of late — why do you speak about my role with such blatant censure?”

“Because you killed a man you were not charged to kill.” Hyoushin said flatly. “And I despise unnecessary bloodshed. There was no need — you are fortunate if this does not complicate our situation further.”

“He was just a bandit, Hyoushin.” Miramu snorted. “The one you should show interest in is the girl you’ve sent your pretty-boy Aoi to find out about. Hikari. *She’s* the one you should care about. Forget the bandit — he’s not important and he never was.”

“Hikari.” Kikei paused in his assessment of the treasures, shooting Miramu a curious look. “You mentioned this girl to me also, Miramu. What is it about her that interests you so much?”

“I’m only an assassin, Kikei-sama. I don’t understand the ways and means of the Beast Gods.” Miramu said evenly. “I only know the little I do through the stories taught to me as a child... so I cannot be certain of anything specific.”

“But...?” Hyoushin said softly. “You and Suiko both spoke of Hikari — and Suiko spoke also of Suzaku’s power within Sairou’s cave. If you won’t tell me, Miramu, at least speak before Kintsusei-sama and explain to him your interest in the girl.”

“Aoiketsu is far better positioned to find out anything you want to know, with those fine features and pretty eyes of his.” Miramu looked amused. “I told you, I don’t know anything. And I certainly wouldn’t know about Suzaku’s magic. I told you — I’m just an assassin who happened to cross paths with Toroki in my youth. That’s all. The only reason I mentioned the girl by name was because she seemed to have elicited Toroki’s support... and I know that Byakko’s prophet doesn’t do anything by halves.”

Hyoushin eyed the assassin thoughtfully, but Miramu met his gaze easily, offering him a playful smile.

“Ah. You don’t believe me.” He said frankly. “That’s unsurprising, I suppose, considering my profession. Your caution probably does you credit, Hyoushin.”

“We’ll await Aoiketsu’s first report, then, before we make a move to the North or the South.” Kintsusei said slowly. “If Suzaku has joined forces with Byakko we must be careful about how we move. We have no Celestial Warriors of our own, after all.”

“Suiko believes we do.” Hyoushin said evenly, and Kikei stared at him.

“Pardon me?” He demanded. “The Seishi for Seiryuu died in the war with Kounan — don’t you think that, as a priest, I’d know if one lived?”

“And yet one does.” Hyoushin smiled faintly at the Priest’s discomfiture. “Amiboshi. Suiko claims he was the guardian of Seiryuu’s Shinzahoo... is this information of any use to us now we have that treasure in our custody?”

“Amiboshi.” Kintsusei’s expression became one of surprise. “And Suiko told you this?”

“Yes.” Hyoushin confirmed. “She said that he was still alive and living in exile in the North Country.”

Kikei’s expression became one of annoyance, and he shook his head impatiently.

“Such information is useless now that we have Seiryuu’s treasure and mage.” He said dismissively. “For now, we must focus on Genbu and Suzaku. I have tried to locate the Shinzahou for the north, but I have had no luck. Not even spies I’ve sent into Hokkan have brought back data... and we must rely on the soldiers in the south to dig out information on Suzaku’s, which is similarly well hidden. It will delay us... but this can’t be helped.”

He frowned, biting his lip.

“Kayu and Maichu have gone to relay Aoiketsu’s information, correct?” He said quietly, and Hyoushin nodded.

“Yes.”

“Can we really spare two men to do one man’s job?”

“We can ill afford to spare one man to do it, Kikei-sama — but we need to know what we are up against.” Hyoushin said pragmatically. “You are considering Kayu’s safety in this, perhaps? Because I believe he is a good enough soldier to keep himself safe.”

“I have no doubt about that.” Kikei shook his head, a thoughtful look glittering in his dark eyes, and something in it put Hyoushin on edge. “Very well. Then when we receive news, perhaps Kintsusei-sama will be able to judge our next move more clearly. Whether to go North or South.”

“I feel it will probably be North, but we will wait for the information before I order any further journeys.” Kintsusei said evenly. “And Miramu — you will be paid for your services so far. But you will not be required to accompany Hyoushin on the next trip... I think for the both of you, that would be a better state of affairs.”

“As you wish, Koutei-sama.” Miramu bowed his head towards the Emperor, his thick dark braid of hair falling over his shoulder as he did so. “If you’d rather I stayed here, then I won’t object. So long as you’re paying me well, I’ve no reason to do anything but obey your orders, after all.”

“Well, so far you have done well. Although I am not pleased to hear you spilled the blood of an enemy.” Kintsusei sighed. “It is a delicate political situation between the East and the South, Miramu — as a

Westerner, you may or may not perceive the intricacies. But please, try to remember it for future reference. We cannot afford a war.”

“I understand, my Lord.” Miramu agreed softly. “It won’t happen again.”

“Then that is resolved.” Kintsusei seemed relieved. “And now, to Byakko’s fang. Miramu, is it true you know a spell that can release Kitora’s spirit and bond her into human form in the way Kikei raised Suiko?”

“Yes, in a sense.” Miramu slipped his fingers into the folds of his clothing, pulling out a small ceramic bottle, which he held out. “I took this when I was in the caves — before I retreated from Toroki’s presence, she dropped it. It contains a special substance carried by Byakko’s chosen — she no doubt brought it to release the fang herself. But I relieved her of it and the fang before she could act.”

Hyoushin eyed the assassin thoughtfully, certain there was a glimmer of untruth in his words, but Kikei had already grasped the vial, pulling the stopper as he gazed inside. He frowned.

“Blood?” He murmured. “Dried... dried blood? This is your special substance?”

“In the West, it is dry, desolate country.” Miramu agreed. “And it is not fresh — I did not wound Toroki, after all. The blood is old and therefore has dried into powdered form from the climate. But it is Seishi blood. The one thing that can release the seal on the casket and raise the mage. Without it, you cannot hope to bring Kitora to life. Not even with all the most holy Seiryuu prayers, Kikei-sama.”

“I see.” Kikei’s dark eyes narrowed and he nodded his head. “Yes, you make sense. This is, after all, Byakko’s treasure. It must be raised by Byakko’s blood.”

He shot Hyoushin a sidelong glance.

“Even if we lacked the same for Seiryuu, it seems my magic was able to overrule that weakness.” He said slowly. “But this is a different God completely. Very well. I know how to proceed.”

He dipped his finger in the dried, blackened substance, rubbing it carefully over the seal of the casket. For a moment it glowed white, then there was a soft click as the lock was released, and as Kikei lifted the lid, all could see the glittering white fang of the tiger, set in soft purple velvet as if placed there by divine hands.

“Byakko’s fang. The relic of Kitora.” Kikei murmured, running his

blood-dusted finger against the artefact, and it glimmered in response to his touch. Satisfied, he nodded his head, reaching over to take the Shinzahou as he sprinkled flecks of the substance over its shiny surface.

“This is truly Byakko’s blood. As ever, Miramu, you have left nothing to chance.” He murmured. “The death of one Suzaku bandit is a small price to pay, Sire, surely, in light of this?”

“I suppose so.” Kintsusei agreed cautiously. “Although I would still rather kill as few people as possible... especially Southerners.”

“But with Kitora, our strength will grow further.”

Kikei closed his eyes, bringing his hands together as he murmured an incantation. As Hyoushin watched, the treasure and the relic both were bathed in dazzling white light, and as he glanced away from it, Hyoushin caught the interested, half-amused expression on Miramu’s face. He frowned, his gaze darting back briefly to the Priest and his spell, before settling on the assassin once more.

“Toroki’s blood?” He mused. “But who carries their own blood around like that? Why would Toroki need dried blood to release the seal of the casket, anyway? I think not. She would not carry such a thing — she need only slash her own fingers to provide all the blood she needed. And she is not a fool — even if she is unbalanced, she is not stupid. She would not be so careless. So where did that blood come from?”

And then, as he remembered Suiko’s words in the cave, his eyes widened.

“Byakko’s rubbish.” He remembered. “Is that what she meant?”

He ran his gaze briefly over the assassin once more, and this time Miramu caught his eye, offering him a knowing smile. In that instant, Hyoushin felt his certainty grow, and he returned the look with an impassive one of his own. Inwardly, however, his thoughts were racing.

“Miramu is one of Byakko’s.” He realised. “He must be. He hides it — but I am sure of it. He alone unlocked the shrine of Kitora. He had blood on his palm — a strange place for a man such as him to sustain a battle wound, even defensively. He used *his* blood — and so the blood that Kikei is casting his spell with is his own. I wonder what that means in the bigger picture. Is Miramu really working with Kikei and the Emperor like he claims to be? Has he really turned so far from Byakko and Sairou that he would willingly give his country’s treasure

into enemy hands? I wonder. And I must be careful. He has kept this a secret for a reason, and to reveal it may be dangerous for all of us. It is better to know it and not speak of it, not even to the Emperor, in case it puts his life in peril. At least, not until I find out more information about Miramu's other self or his long term intentions. But it concerns me."

He bit his lip absently, even as he saw the flare of light begin to solidify and take the distinctive form of a woman before them in the shrine. Even though her body was still translucent, Hyoushin could clearly make out her features, with the vivid golden eyes and the flowing white hair that curled over her shoulders and down her back. Like Suiko, she was ethereal in her appearance, her robes patterned with the brown and green of the forest and around her throat glittered a pendant in the shape of the chinese character for 'tree'.

"Ki." He reflected. "Kitora. So as Suiko has power over the element of water, does Kitora then have power over the element of wood? What would that mean, then? *Plant* life? Did not Kikei-sama once say that one of Byakko's warriors commanded such similar powers, in the past?"

He frowned, struggling to remember the little he knew about Byakko's people as the haze began to fade and Kitora shook her head as if to clear it, hair flying out in all directions as she did so. The gesture was somehow in keeping with her feline, feral appearance and there was something else in the mage's expression that put Hyoushin immediately on his guard. Where Suiko had a tendency for petulance and temper, Kitora's expression contained a flicker of cool, sardonic amusement, and as she brought her hand up absently to her face to brush her wild waves of hair from her face, Hyoushin was aware that instead of normal human nails, Kitora's fingers bore sharp animal claws.

"Kitora-sama." Kikei bowed his head before her, raising his gaze to meet hers. "We have awoken you from your sleep. Will you assist us in our quest for peace?"

Kitora eyed him for a moment. Then she smiled, a teasing, humourless smile as she reached out to brush her long, slender fingers against his face.

"I am Kitora, the *Byakko* mage." She murmured. "I have been woken by Byakko's blood to do Byakko's bidding. Not yours, little man."

"Byakko has given Kikei-sama and Kutou's Emperor, Lord Kintsusei

his blessing by giving him the blood of a Seishi.” Miramu said quietly. “Kitora-sama, as a man of the West, I confirm that this is Byakko’s will. You are needed in Kutou — for the sake of Sairou and its people.”

Kitora’s eyes widened as she registered his presence, her gaze falling on him as she slowly crossed the floor towards him. Without a word she reached out her fingers, scraping her nail pensively against the leather collar that the assassin always wore at his throat. Miramu frowned, reaching up to push her hand away.

“Shadow, are you?” Kitora seemed amused by this, and something in the sing-song nature of her voice almost made her sound kittenish. “You bear the character ‘*kage*’ at your throat. Well, *Kage*... and you are here to represent Byakko’s blessing?”

Miramu did not respond, and Kitora raised her fingers, scratching her long cat’s claws down his cheek as she drew blood. Miramu glared at her, and she offered him a warm smile, glancing at the glittering red liquid that now stained her fingers. Then, very deliberately, she licked them clean.

At length, she nodded.

“Very well.” She agreed, turning back to face Kikei with a derisive, half-condescending smile. “If it is Byakko’s will I serve Kutou, so be it. I will do as you bid me, little man — as you possess the fang and the Shinzahou, you must indeed have the Tiger’s blessing.”

“Then you will help us?” Kintsusei looked relieved, and Kitora sent him a piercing look.

“I will.” She agreed. “You have my word, Kutou no Koutei-sama. I will obey Byakko’s obligation and fight for the East.”

Something about the inflection of her words reminded Hyoushin of Miramu’s equally evasive use of language, and the Meihi frowned, surveying their newest ally with faint distrust.

“She tasted Miramu’s blood and changed her allegiance. So I am right in my suspicions. He is indeed one of Byakko’s Celestial Warriors, just as his sister is.” He decided. “But this raises a problematic question. Suiko was raised by Aoiketsu’s inferior blood. Now Kitora has been awoken by the tainted, bitter blood of an assassin. I don’t pretend I understand divine magic, but I’m sure that Suiko is not meant to be as much trouble as she has proven to be. This must be a side effect of the way in which she was brought to life. So if that’s true — what kind of spirit will Kitora prove to be? With

Miramu's blood unlocking her spirit — what have we unleashed?"

Morning.

Aoiketsu rested his hands on the sill of the window, wincing as he jarred his gashed arm. It was another bright Kounan day, but somehow, he reflected, it was hard to equate the tropical warmth of the south with the dry arid dustiness of the Western lands.

"Is this why the Shougun was so interested in Kounan?" He wondered, as he leant up against the wall, gazing absently across the land that made up the apothecary's herbal farmstead. "Because even though it's hot, and smaller than Kutou, it has such lush vegetation? And it seems so peaceful... it's hard to believe that a border away in Kutou so many people are suffering so much."

He sighed, shaking his head as if to clear it.

"I hope Hyoushin-sama made it safely back." He reflected. "And that Maichu and Kayu have reached their destinations easily, too. It's risky... and if I'm going to be travelling with this Hikari and her friends, I'll be on the move. It'll be much harder for them to keep tabs on me, if that's the case. We might have to reassess our communication plans. Although it doesn't seem like Kounan have any information on Genbu's Shinzahou either. So I wonder... Commander, what would you have me do?"

"Aoi-kun?"

A voice from the doorway made him start and he turned, a smile touching his lips as he registered the young girl who had been so kind to her the previous afternoon. She was probably about fifteen or sixteen, he decided, and he had been surprised when he had first realised that this was the Hikari that he had been sent to learn about. At first glance she looked no different from any other young village girl, although her hair was fastened in an unfamiliar style, and vaguely he remembered the oddness of her attire on the previous afternoon's encounter. However, now she was garbed in the average dress of a southern villager, and in the fresh light of day he found himself wondering what it was that had attracted so much attention in Sairou.

"How's your arm?" Oblivious to his thoughts, the girl slipped into the room, closing the door behind her. "Chichiri's gone to the mountain to speak to Tasuki and Shishi about our plans... I think he's going to bring Shishi back with him, so we can discuss it properly. You are still going to come with us, aren't you? There's been no sign

of Miramu in the last few hours, because Myoume's still here and she's been keeping an eye open. But it's probably not safe for you to take off on your own."

"I've no desire to do that." Aoiketsu eyed her ruefully. "As you've seen, I'm no match for one of Byakko's chosen warriors."

"No, nor are we, I don't think." Hikari sighed. "It's all right, Aoi. Shishi might think you're a wimp, but I don't. I mean, not everyone is a fighter. And I really don't want to see Miramu kill anyone else. Losing Jin... was hard enough. I can't let it happen again."

"This Jin was a close friend of yours?" Aoiketsu asked curiously, and Hikari nodded her head.

"Sort of." She agreed. "It's hard... to explain what he was, really."

"Perhaps... more than a friend?" Aoiketsu asked softly, and Hikari reddened, shaking her head.

"No. He wasn't that." She replied firmly. "I mean... I don't know, maybe he might have been, eventually, if he... if he hadn't died when he did. But I... I wasn't in love with him. If anything he was like a brother figure to me like he was Shishi. But... he and Shishi grew up together. It's different for her."

She sighed again, leaning up against the wall next to him.

"I really wonder what Kutou must be like, to allow all these things to happen." She reflected absently. Aoiketsu frowned.

"A very sad place." He murmured softly. "Full of civil war and rebellion. And blood. Lots of that."

"I guess it must be painful for you to think of — I'm sorry." Hikari looked guilty. "With your family and all."

"I never knew them." Aoiketsu said truthfully, running his finger absently over the Kaiga ring that still glittered on his right hand. "But I carry this, so I'm bound to them. So long as I have this, no one else can claim the Kaiga lands."

"You could just give it to them, then they might leave you alone." Hikari suggested, and Aoiketsu shook his head.

"It was the last thing my Mother gave me, before she died." He said gravely. "It's more to me than a symbol of my family. It's the only thing I have that she once had... the last thread between her and I. So it's more important than deeds to property. It's a true family keepsake."

"I'm sorry." Hikari looked sheepish. "I guess I sort of understand that. I mean, I miss my mother a lot, when I'm here."

"Chichiri-san said you were his ward — you seem to be a part of the Ri family, from the way the young ones have adopted you." Aoiketsu spied an opening and took it, leaning back as he surveyed her with interest. "Does that mean your parents are also gone, Hikari?"

"My parents..." Hikari hesitated, then she shook her head.

"They're both alive, but I can't be with them at present." She said carefully. "So I stay here, with Chichiri and Aidou-san. They've been kind to me. Chichiri is an old friend of my father's... so it seems logical."

"An old friend, huh?" Aoiketsu looked startled, and Hikari nodded.

"He was Tamahome, once." She said softly. "Of the Suzaku Shichi Seishi. Sou Kishuku."

"Tamahome..." Aoiketsu's eyes widened with surprise. "Truthfully? You are, then, the daughter of one of Kounan's blessed, as Shishi appears to be?"

"Yes." Hikari looked sheepish. "Hard to believe it, huh? I really don't glitter with divinity. But it's true. Father was Tamahome. Only he hasn't been for a long time. He can't fight for Suzaku any more, so it's in Chichiri and Tasuki's hands. And I've come to help, because, well, I care about Kounan too. And... and I don't want anything bad to happen to Mei-chan and Eiju in particular."

"I see." Aoiketsu bit his lip. "You have a kind heart, Hikari-san. You spoke well to me yesterday, when I was just a useless stranger in the forest. And you are obviously fond of Chichiri-san and his family. I'm sure they're glad of your help at a time when they perceive danger to Kounan."

"I wonder about that." Hikari rubbed her temples. "I feel more like a burden most of the time. But it's different now Jin is... now he's passed on. I won't forgive that, no matter what. Your enemy is our enemy, Aoi — the assassin known as Miramu. I won't ever forgive him for killing Jin, or for hurting Meikyo or causing pain to Myoume by acting in the way he does. And now I'm angry for the fact he hurt you, too. So no matter what, we'll stop him and we'll put an end to the madness in Kutou. Somehow. We'll show them that you can't be that way."

Aoiketsu was silent for a moment, digesting this. Then, slowly, he

inclined his head.

"I wish I could be of help." He said softly. "But I'm afraid I will prove to be useless in my own way."

"You can't help being squeamish at the sight of blood." Hikari pointed out, offering him a grin. "I'm sort of glad you are, actually. Like I said yesterday, Shishi's so strong, and I always feel like the useless one. I don't know if I could offer my life in exchange for someone else's the way Jin did in Sairou, either. So it's nice to find someone who has real fears that hold them back. I hate feeling like a coward... do you ever feel that way, too?"

"I have often been frustrated by my weakness." Aoiketsu said honestly. "But at least you have a cause to believe in, Hikari-san. I... I'm just trouble for anyone who helps me."

"Rubbish." Hikari grasped him by the hand, squeezing it tightly. "You're alive, and you know the way to Touran. Right? And from there to the mountains? In which case, when we do leave, you'll be better than a map! In Sairou, Jin did most of the navigating. He was... really good at reading maps and though Shishi can, she's not so good as Jin was. But if you can — it will help."

"Then I'll do my best to do my share." Aoiketsu promised solemnly. "I just hope my presence among you doesn't attract danger."

"Hikari-nee-chan! Hikari-nee-chan!"

At that moment, the door of the chamber flew open to reveal Meikyo, red hair flying as she hurried excitedly up to the schoolgirl. "Hikari-nee-chan, there's someone who wants help and Kaa-san has gone to see Hakei-san because her baby is coughing — she's not here! Will you come and speak to them, please? Kaa-san said she'd be right back, but Papa's still on Reikaku-zan with Uncle Wolf an' I can't find Myoume-san anywhere!"

"Myoume's scouting for danger again, I suppose." Hikari frowned, clasping the girl's tiny fingers in hers. "Well, I'll come, Mei-chan, but I doubt that I know anything about herbs or anything like that. So if it's a potential patient, they'll have to wait until Aidou-san or Chichiri are home."

She cast Aoiketsu a grin.

"Will you come too, Aoi?" She asked, and Aoiketsu looked surprised.

"All right." He agreed, nodding his head. "So long as there's no

blood.”

“Aoi-niichan doesn’t like blood?” Meikyo eyed him in surprise. “But... you’re a boy. Aren’t you?”

“Yes, I’m a boy. I’m just a boy who doesn’t like blood.” Aoiketsu said with a faint smile, and Meikyo frowned.

“I didn’t know boys could be like that.” She said seriously. “Hikari-neechan, did you know? Jin-nii wasn’t scared of blood — and he always had a sword. But Aoi-nii doesn’t have a sword and he’s scared of blood, too.”

“I know.” Hikari agreed. “But everyone’s different, Mei-chan. I don’t like horses, or spiders, all that much. And your father doesn’t carry a sword, either. Not all men do.”

“No, but Papa has magic and he’s Suzaku’s.” Meikyo responded. She cast Aoiketsu a smile.

“I don’t mind blood.” She said, reaching up to slip her hand into his as she repeated the gesture with Hikari’s. “It’s just stuff from inside of you, you know? But I don’t like it when Papa is away from home. Then I’m scared. Papa says everyone is scared of something... I guess blood is just the thing you don’t like, isn’t it?”

“I guess so.” Aoiketsu eyed her, nonplussed, and Hikari laughed.

“All right, Meikyo. Let’s go see to this visitor.” She said playfully. “You lead the way. We’re right behind you.”

Meikyo nodded her head, hurrying out of the door and as her two older companions followed at a slower pace, Aoiketsu shot Hikari a sidelong glance.

“I see why you like this place.” He said quietly. “I’ve never had siblings... it must be nice.”

“Well, my own brother I can’t stand, but Meikyo and Eiju are lovely.” Hikari laughed. “I suppose that you would be an only child, though, if your mother died when you were born. I guess it must’ve been sort of lonely.”

“Yes.” Aoiketsu agreed. “It was, at times. But I wasn’t totally alone. I mean, I had the man who raised me... but then I... I was separated from him, too. And now I am completely on my own.”

“Did... did he die?”

“Not exactly. We were just... separated.” Aoiketsu shook his head, realising they were shifting close to dangerous territory and he

frowned, changing the subject. "So you have a brother? Older or younger?"

"Younger." Hikari replied. "Eiju's age. But he's with my parents... and I'm here. So you won't meet him. My home's a long journey from here, and difficult to get to."

"I see." Aoiketsu didn't see, but decided it was as well not to press the point for at that moment they reached the front room of the house, where Meikyo was talking excitedly to a hooded, caped figure. At the sight of him, Aoiketsu's eyes widened, and it was all he could do not to shout out the man's name. As the stranger removed the hood of his cape, he met Aoiketsu's gaze across the room, and the soldier saw a flicker of relief in his eyes.

"I'm sorry, but Ri-san isn't home at the moment." Oblivious to the glance, Hikari stepped forward, bowing her head apologetically in the stranger's direction. "And I don't know anything about herbs, so I wouldn't know what to say. But if you want to take a seat, Aidou-san will be back soon, I know she will. And I can make you some tea — at least, I can if Mei-chan helps me."

"I'll help." Meikyo nodded immediately, and Hikari offered her a smile.

"Right." She said. "Would that be acceptable, okyaku-sama?"

"Thank you... it would." The young man nodded his head. "I am in no pressing hurry."

He frowned ruefully, reaching down to rub his boots.

"I can't ride any further with the blisters on my feet." He added. "So a rest will be welcome."

"Then Aoi, can you look after him for a minute while Mei-chan and I get tea?" Hikari sent Aoiketsu a quizzical look, and Aoiketsu gathered his wits, nodding his head.

"That I think I can manage." He agreed ironically. "Yes, Hikari-san. I'll do as you say."

"Then we'll be right back. Come on, Mei-chan — you know where Aidou-san keeps all the ingredients." Hikari flashed the youngster a smile, and as they left the room, Aoiketsu let out a sigh, sinking down onto an empty bench.

"I thought you were supposed to be in Kahou." He murmured softly. "Why are you here in the Eastern Village, Kayu?"

“To make sure you’re alive, of course.” Kayu’s eyes narrowed. “And that Suzaku’s folk haven’t slaughtered you yet. But obviously you’re fine... so I could have saved myself the ride.”

He grimaced down at his feet.

“Besides, I do have blisters.” He added. “Maichu and I both parted ways and he headed to Eiyou. I said I’d come here and make sure all was well, since I had a just reason to come to an apothecary and Hyoushin-sama’s intelligence told me that much about Chichiri of Suzaku. I suppose it’s too soon to expect you to know anything important yet?”

“Too soon indeed. I’ve barely been here ten seconds.” Aoiketsu frowned. “Give me a chance at the very least.”

“All right.” Kayu relented, nodding his head.

“Although...” Aoiketsu hesitated, remembering the recent conversation, and pausing. “Maybe there’s one thing. At least, I don’t know if it matters or not. But it might.”

“Anything is better than nothing.” Kayu arched an eyebrow. “What is it?”

“This Hikari kid seems like any other village kid to me. No different from the bandit she spends time with.” Aoiketsu said honestly. “She’s an average young girl as far as I can see. But she told me her father was Tamahome of the Suzaku Shichi Seishi. So maybe that’s why Suiko was so interested in her — because she’s got Suzaku Seishi heritage. Almost certainly it’s why she’s wrapped up in all this — the bandit girl she hangs out with is Tasuki’s daughter, so if Hikari’s Tamahome’s it makes some sense. Even if that’s all she is, it’s still in her blood.”

“Tamahome, huh?” Kayu’s eyes narrowed. “That’s the bastard who slew the Shougun, ain’t it?”

“Yes. The same one.” Aoiketsu nodded his head.

“Then you be damn careful, Aoi-kun.” Kayu warned him. “If she finds out you’re from Kutou an’ representin’ Kintsusei-sama — you don’t know if the daughter’s the same as the father in that respect.”

“She doesn’t seem to be violent or aggressive.” Aoiketsu admitted. “I think... she seems like a normal girl to me. Actually, she seems quite kind. But I suppose it might be an act, since I’m the interloper.”

“So as I said, be careful.” Kayu repeated, and Aoiketsu nodded.

"I will." He agreed. "Tamahome was the one who slew our Shougun, not Hikari — but you're right. It never hurts to be cautious."

"And it's something I can report back when Maichu and I confer." Kayu added. "So when I've got something for my feet, I'll ride to Eiyou and speak to him. I think we might be working in relay, in terms of conveying messages home."

"No, that won't work." Aoiketsu shook his head, his gaze flitting towards the door to the back room as he heard a peal of Meikyo's laughter. "Speak more quietly, Kayu. I can't risk being found out yet. But no — the Southerners are preparing for a trip North. To Hokkan. Touran, to be exact. So I won't be here."

"You've already inveigled yourself an invite?" Kayu looked startled, and Aoiketsu grinned.

"I didn't even have to try." He admitted. "Apparently because they think Miramu is after me, they consider it a safer option for me to be with them. But listen, Kayu. Toroki is here. The woman you met in Sairou — she's definitely an ally of Suzaku. I met her last night and she looked at me... for a long time. She hasn't said anything, but I... I'm not sure. I have to be very careful around her. Right now she's keeping an eye on the village from some unknown location while Chichiri's away from his post here — she takes things very seriously, and she has a way of tracking down Miramu. But if she's around, she mustn't see you here."

"Damn right." Kayu shivered. "I don't like that dame. She's creepy. And besides, we've met before... I don't intend on her seeing me here."

He frowned.

"Maichu and I will have to reassess our plans, then." He decided with a sigh. "I think it's probably better if you're heading to Genbu's country that one of us shadows your trip and the other reports back to Kutou. I'm worried about Kintsusei-sama and Lord Kikei in the absence of the three of us."

"I think Kikei-sama will take care of himself, and Hyoushin-sama will take care of the Emperor if he needs it." Aoiketsu said firmly. Kayu's brows knitted together.

"I'm worried about that, too." He owned. "It's a bad feeling I have, and I can't explain it fully. But Hyoushin-sama sent you, me and Maichu south. Doesn't that seem odd to you? Maichu thinks it's an honour — a promotion, if you like. A special errand on the Emperor's

orders. But... it seems strange. The three of us are probably the strongest and most loyal soldiers in the Imperial Guard at the moment. Why has he risked all three of us at once?"

"What are you trying to say?" Aoiketsu stared. "That Hyoushin-sama's sent us away because we're loyal to the Emperor? But so's he!"

"I... don't know." Kayu bit his lip. "Look, I can't tell you much more. Just, talk to that Toroki dame if you can. Find out what she knows about Kutou. She said something when we took the Shinzahou that spooked me and I can't get it out of my mind. Something about the Emperor and an enemy of tribal birth. Maichu thinks it was a ruse, but she was half-mad in the eyes when she said it... so find out what you can. If just for my peace of mind."

"Are you suggesting Hyoushin-sama is going to betray the Emperor?" Aoiketsu frowned. "That's the biggest nonsense you've ever come up with, Kayu!"

"I know, it sounds insane, but I can't think of any other explanation." Kayu bit his lip. "Hyoushin-sama made us promise not to tell anyone, and Maichu hasn't — but I'm not sure it's a promise I want to keep, if it has implications like that. The Emperor's safety is important... for Kutou's sake, all hell would let loose if anything happened to him. We both know that. So if Hyoushin-sama isn't the guilty party, we need to know who is and whether or not Toroki was lying. You're in the perfect position to find out that... do you think you can?"

"Hyoushin-sama would never betray the Emperor, but I'll see what I can do." Aoiketsu said with a sigh. "If just to prove that's the case."

"I want that to be the case, too." Kayu said grimly. "Though I don't know why he'd want us to keep it a secret if there's nothing to it."

"I wasn't there so I can't comment." Aoiketsu said evenly. "But I won't ever believe the Commander could betray anyone. He probably doesn't even know the kanji for betrayal... I'm serious. You should focus on your duty and on helping Kutou. Go to Eiyuu, find Maichu and tell him what I told you — that in a few days, maybe a week we'll be heading North. I haven't any information on any Shinzahou, yet. It's too soon. But if one of you shadows our progress, I might learn more. All right?"

"All right." Kayu sat back in his seat with a sigh. "I get it."

He pursed his lips.

"You know, with your hair bound like that, you do look like the

spoiled Kaiga exile.” He acknowledged. “Seeing you without a sword is like seeing a man without his leg. And what happened to your arm? I don’t remember you being wounded when you left Hengei.”

“Miramu’s parting gift to me.” Aoiketsu touched the bandage grimly. “Listen, if you want to beware anyone, Kayu — be careful of him. He’s sick in the head.”

“I suppose he thought if you were wounded, you’d be easier to feel sorry for.” Kayu mused. “I bet you heaved your guts a bit over that.”

“It wasn’t pleasant.” Aoiketsu said stiffly. “And shut up — I think they’re coming back.”

“I’m sorry to keep you waiting so long, okyaku-sama.” Hikari re-entered the chamber at that moment, bearing with her a mug of steaming tea. “Here. Aidou-san has just come back and I’ve told her you’re here — she’ll be right through to see you as soon as she’s gathered the right ointment for travel blisters.”

“You’re kind.” Kayu offered Hikari a warm smile. “I’m supposed to be in Eiyou by nightfall, and my father will be ready to kill me if I’m not there.”

“You’re a trader then, okyaku-sama?” Aoiketsu asked softly, and Kayu nodded his head.

“Trade’s always good in the south.” He agreed. “And I’ll be in trouble if we waste even a day of good business.”

“My apologies for the delay, okyaku-san.” Aidou herself emerged at that instant, a vial of something in her hand as she bowed her head towards him. “I’ll tend to your needs now. Mei-chan, thank you for playing hostess, and for your help too, Hikari-chan. You’re relieved now, though — why don’t you take Aoi-san up to the mountain? Meikyo has chores to attend to, and I’m sure Hou Jun will have a use for the pair of you up there, since it’s on account of your trip he’s gone.”

“Good idea.” Hikari nodded. “Aoi, are you game? I need to go to Reikaku-zan, anyway. I... I haven’t been there, since Jin was buried. And I need to go... and see him.”

Her voice trembled slightly as she spoke, and Aoiketsu shot her a glance, a faint flicker of sympathy stirring inside of him. He nodded.

“I’d like to see this Reikaku-zan mountain. I’ve heard a lot about it and its infamous bandits.” He agreed evenly. “Will you lead the way, Hikari-san?”

He bowed his head in Kayu's direction, their gazes meeting briefly once again. "Please excuse us, okyaku-sama — I wish you much fortune with your business in Eiyuu."

"Indeed. Thank you, sir." Kayu replied gravely. "I trust our trip will prove successful."

The walk up to the mountain was not a long one, and as they climbed higher above the valley, Hikari paused to point out various of the villages in the surrounding area.

"And that's Souun." She concluded. "All of this area is protected by the bandits that live on this mountain. They call themselves bandits, but I guess they're not entirely thieves and rogues. I mean, they do take care of the poor people in the villages and stuff. And because Tasuki is here, and Kashira, they see him as Suzaku watching over them. I think he sees it, too... that he's the closest thing they have to a divine guardian. He seems to take it real seriously, because some of the villages hereabouts are really poor."

"I suppose I didn't think of bandits acting in that way." Aoiketsu turned to survey the landscape. "And that is the village we've come from? The so called Eastern Village?"

"Yes, although in truth it lies to the west of Reikaku-zan." Hikari sent him a rueful look. "I don't know how it got its name, to be honest. It might have something to do with Kaou-zan, though. That's the mountain in the distance... but we don't ever go there. Seriously, Aoi, the bandits there are really bad news."

"True rogues, perhaps?" Aoiketsu reflected, and Hikari nodded.

"From what I've heard." She agreed. "They've tried to kidnap both Shishi and her mother on numerous occasions."

"Then that explains why Shishi carries a sword." Aoiketsu murmured. "I am honestly not used to seeing a girl with a blade at her waist — but somehow it does not seem wrong, with her."

"No. And she's a good fighter with it, too." Hikari said ruefully. "Thankfully. Because I have a sword too — at least, it's sort of mine. It was lent to me by Reizeitei-sama. But... it's not really mine and I can't really use it properly. It once belonged to Hotohori-sama of the Suzaku Shichi Seishi — but I don't have a clue how to wield it."

"You have met Kounan's Emperor?" Aoiketsu stared at her, and Hikari laughed.

"On two occasions." She admitted. "His father and mine were battle

comrades — remember?”

“I’m not so knowledgeable about Kounan’s history as I could be.” Aoiketsu admitted, and Hikari grinned.

“That’s right. You’re from Kutou.” She remembered. “It’s easy to forget that, because when I think of Kutou I think of all the bad stuff that’s been going on lately. And the stories Shishi and the others have told me, about Seiryuu’s Shichi Seishi. But when we were in the North, I did meet the man who was once known as Amiboshi. And he was a kind man, too. So I suppose it’s not fair to think that all people from Kutou are bad. I’m sorry, Aoi-kun. I’m being unfair towards your homeland, aren’t I?”

“At present, probably not.” Aoiketsu bit his lip, a wistful look entering his seiran eyes as he shook his head. “As I said, Kutou is a very sad place. And I wish it was at peace, so that I could go home and not worry about any of this. But it isn’t and I cannot and such is life.”

“You can stay in Kounan, though. We’ll stop Miramu from hurting you.” Hikari said firmly. “I promise, I won’t let him kill anyone else if I can stop it.”

“Thank you.” Aoiketsu offered her a smile. “As I said before, you have a kind heart. Especially towards a stranger about whom you know next to nothing.”

“I know that Miramu hurt you, and that your family were dead.” Hikari replied. “Chichiri told us about the Kaiga family before you regained consciousness yesterday — because he saw your ring. So we already knew something about it. It’s all right, Aoi-kun. Even if you were born in Kutou, you don’t need to worry about it. You’re welcome in Kounan — *you’re* not the enemy we’re fighting against.”

Aoiketsu was silent for a moment, eying her keenly as he absorbed her open, resolute expression. As he met her hazel gaze, he felt a faint flicker of guilt stir up inside of him for his deception, and he frowned, unnerved by the fleeting sensation.

“This is Tamahome’s daughter. The child of the man who destroyed the Shougun and his companions.” He told himself firmly. “Why, then, do I feel bad lying to her? I’m not here to pander to Kounan’s needs but to help Kutou to achieve its objectives and find peace. Kounan already has peace — they don’t need Shinzahou and surely it *must* be an act of spite or greed that drives them to collect them. But... to what end? I really don’t understand any of this. And what Kayu said — does he really believe Hyoushin-sama might be a traitor? That’s

nonsense. I won't believe it. But Kayu... Kayu wasn't sure. Everything's so complicated — I hope I can find out the information I'm here to find soon. Then I can retreat and go home and report all I know to the people who I have faith in. Nothing else matters — I'll do my duty and report to Hyoushin-sama and Kintsusei-sama the information they need. Hikari and the people of the South aren't important. At the moment, they're the enemy. Keep that in mind, Aoi, and keep on your guard — you don't know enough about anything yet to make a confident decision."

"Are you still with me?" Hikari waved her hand in front of his eyes at that moment and he jumped, turning his head towards her with a rueful smile.

"Sorry." He said apologetically. "I was enjoying the peace and the beauty and I became lost in it for a brief moment."

"Kounan is beautiful." Hikari agreed. "I really hope it can stay that way. I've heard so many horrible stories about the last war. I really don't want there to be another one... even if I'm not here to see the worst of it."

"Why would you not be?" Aoiketsu was startled, and Hikari looked sheepish.

"My home is a long way from here." She said evenly. "I told you."

"But it's not even within Kounan?"

"No." Hikari agreed. "But it's complicated to explain. It's just a long way away, that's all."

"I see." Aoiketsu frowned. "So Tamahome can't help his fellows in your quest, then, because he is too far from Kounan to be of use?"

"Yes. Exactly." Hikari nodded.

"But *you're* here."

"Like I said, it's complicated." Hikari shrugged. "And really not all that interesting. Besides, we're here. This is the pathway that leads to the bandit hideout — just stick with me, okay? They know who I am, now, and that I'm under Tasuki's protection. So noone will hurt you, not while you're with me."

"Hiki!"

Before Aoiketsu could reply, Shishi had jumped down from a tree branch, landing squarely on the path in front of them and making Aoiketsu jump with the suddenness of her appearance.

“Chichiri said you were coming this way, so I came to meet you.” She said with a grin. “He and Papa... Kashira are discussing the best route for us to take North. It seems complicated, so I really hope your navigation is up to something, Aoi. Especially when we reach Touran.”

“I have a good memory.” Aoiketsu nodded. “And I’m a competent map reader, also... I would not have escaped with my life to this point if I did not have some navigational skill at finding alternate routes to take. I promise, I know my way.”

“Then we’ll be fine.” Hikari said decidedly. “Aidou-san had someone who needed a remedy, so we came this way to meet up with you and get out of her way. Myoume’s patrolling the village — at least, I guess she’s still hunting her brother’s chi, or something like that. I’ve not seen her since dawn. But I wanted to show Aoi the view from the mountain, so I brought him with me. And... and while I’m here... Shishi, I wanted to... see Jin.”

“Yeah, I figured.” Shishi frowned, then nodded her head. “Are you going to bring wimp boy there with you, or are we leaving him behind?”

“I could wait for you here.” Aoiketsu offered, but Hikari shook her head.

“I don’t want to leave you on your own. Not in bandit country — they don’t know you.” She said frankly. “You’d better come.”

“But you keep your distance from my brother’s grave.” Shishi added. “It’s nothin’ funny, just...”

“It’s all right.” Aoiketsu offered her a slight smile. “I understand. He was known to you and to Hikari-san — and he was dear to you both. I am a stranger. I will not intrude on your time with him — I promise.”

“Good.” Relief flickered into the bandit’s bronze gaze. “Because no offence to you, but it really ain’t your business.”

“And I wouldn’t try and make it so.” Aoiketsu said evenly. Shishi sighed, shaking her head at him resignedly.

“Do you always speak so damn formal?” She demanded. “You sound like a stuck up spoiled court brat right at the moment. Relax a little, will you? Dressed like that, with your hair in ties... you look like a prime target for robbers if not for your assassin stalker. We should have burned that for the blood instead of letting Aidou-obasama mend it and clean it through — and we ought to make you out like a bandit while you’re here. At least then you’d look less easy

to take down, even if you are a prize wimp.”

“I’d rather dress in my own attire, thank you.” Aoiketsu affected indignation, and Shishi sighed.

“Hiki, you’re chief babysitter since he’s stoppin’ with you at Chichiri’s right now.” She said frankly. “Can’t you do somethin’ about him? At least make him dress like a friggin’ peasant if not like a bandit. Maybe he’s scared to have a sword in case he cuts himself an’ passes out, but he could look less distinctive. Especially if we’re travellin’ north. People will notice.”

“Shishi has a point.” Hikari reflected. “Aoi, we might need to discuss that with Chichiri when we get back to the village. Maybe he or Aidou-san will have an idea.”

“But...” Aoiketsu began, and Shishi shot him a dark look.

“Do as you’re told.” She snapped. “Or do you want to advertise your presence to that bastard Miramu for miles around?”

“No, of course not, but I...”

“Then it won’t hurt to tame your appearance down a little. You ain’t the goddamn Emperor, after all.” Shishi shook her head. “You’re an exile, that’s all. A noble son, maybe, but a damn exile — that means you’re no better’n anyone else, an’ you can dress like it, too.”

“Peasant clothing is uncomfortable.” Aoiketsu said mildly, and Shishi snorted.

“Not as uncomfortable as bein’ impaled on my sword.” She said bluntly. “So think on that, okay? Come on, Hiki. We’re goin’ to see Jin — Aoi, you follow us but keep your distance, okay? Remember what you said about intrudin’ — I don’t know what kind of honour Kutou’s exiled nobility cling to, but whatever it is, use it, huh?”

With that she grabbed Hikari by the arm, pulling her off to the left towards a mountain path almost hidden by the thick growth of trees. Aoiketsu followed at a safe distance, resisting the urge to retort to Shishi’s brusque words as he reached up to finger a lock of his dark hair.

“Well, I seem to be convincing as the Kaiga’s exiled son.” He mused ruefully. “She won’t let up, but at least if she’s looking at me that way, she won’t imagine I’m anything other than what I seem. Hyoushin-sama was right — all that tuition and all that time spent in proximity to court nobility as a child has prepared me well for this. At this rate they’ll never suspect that Kaiga Aoiketsu is actually a soldier of the

Imperial Guard and no more noble than either of them.”

As the trees began to thin out ahead, he could make out the distinctive shape of two stone tombs constructed on a smoothed ledge of the mountain, and alongside them lay a third carved casket, the beginnings of a similar shelter growing up around it. He paused, leaning up against the tree as he observed first Shishi then Hikari kneel down beside the casket, and he frowned.

“The bandit. Jin.” He murmured. “The one Miramu killed in Sairou. I don’t know whether or not he’s important to all of this. But I know he’s not just a bandit. This whole mission is important to Kounan, even if I don’t understand it yet.”

He sighed, running his gaze over the boy’s tomb.

“You were younger than me, but you died for your country like any soldier.” He reflected. “And now I’m here to rip apart that sacrifice you made and render it useless. I don’t know why it should bother me, because I never met you and I never will. Maybe it’s because of how Hikari speaks — and Shishi too. But Hikari... especially Hikari. The way she said... about never forgiving Miramu for what he’d done. Why do I start to feel guilty about it? He was just a Kounan bandit... wasn’t he?”

He ran his fingers through his thick dark hair.

“Hyoushin-sama always taught us not to value life cheaply. Perhaps that’s why I feel like I do.” He acknowledged. “Or it’s because Hikari and her companions have generally been kind to me. Especially her. Like she really wants us to be friends. And in another circumstance, I’d want to be friends with her too. But shit, I’m a spy. This Kaiga Aoiketsu is an act — all of it is just pretend. I’m here for information, not to make friends. And no matter how kind she is, I mustn’t falter in my resolve. She’s Tamahome’s daughter. Tamahome killed the Shougun. That makes her my enemy.”

His gaze flitted to the two girls once more, as he observed the serious expressions on their faces and the glitter of tears that dusted Hikari’s cheeks. Faintly he could just make out her voice, and as he heard her words, something clenched inside of him.

“I’m sorry, Jin. For being a coward, and for putting you in this position.” She said, her voice shaking as she spoke the words. “I feel like I let you down. But I promise it won’t happen again. I won’t forget any of this... I won’t forget what you’ve done for me. I won’t let Miramu or Kutou get away with murdering you. We will stop this — we’ll prevent everything from being destroyed. You died to make sure

I lived — and I swear, Jin, I won't let it go to waste. I'm not going to be scared any more — I'm not going to be a coward. I promise... I'm here and I'll stay here till Kounan is truly safe. I swear it... that's what I'm going to do."

She clenched her hands together and Aoiketsu bit his lip as he registered the resolve both on her face and in her voice.

"For your sake and for Kounan's sake, we're going to succeed this time." She said firmly. "No matter what dirty tricks Kutou's people pull on us... this time we're going to *win*!"

:::Byakko no Yokan:::

—Owari—